

HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

Volume 30 : Number Three : Fall 2009

Accountability

Refounding Religious Life

The Challenge of Reconfiguration

Revisiting Perseverance

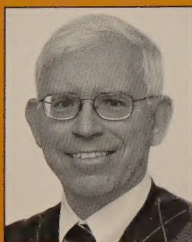
Facing Hard Realities

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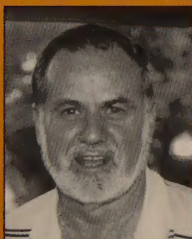
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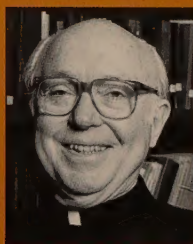
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HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

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Manuscripts should be submitted to the Editor-in-Chief, Robert M. Hamma (rhamma@regis.edu) as an e-mail attachment. Please allow four to six weeks time for a response.

Manuscripts are received with the understanding that they have not been previously published and are not currently under consideration elsewhere. Feature articles should be limited to 4,500 words (15 double-spaced pages), with no more than 6 recommended readings; filler items of between 500 and 1,000 words will be considered. All accepted material is subject to editing. When quoting the Bible, the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible is preferred.

Authors are responsible for the completeness and accuracy of proper names in both text and bibliography. Acknowledgments must be given when substantial material is quoted from other publications. Provide author name(s), title of article, title of journal or book, volume number, page(s), month and year, and publisher's permission to use material.

Letters are welcome and will be published as space permits and at the discretion of the editors. Such communications should not exceed 600 words and are subject to editing.

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Editor's Page

TRANSFORMATION OR DIMINISHMENT?

There is a common practice that faith-sharing groups will often use when reflecting on the scriptures. After the group has read the passage, the leader will ask: What words or phrases stood out for you in this passage? And the members will each, in turn, offer the words or phrases that struck them.

As I reflected on this issue of HUMAN DEVELOPMENT, certain words and phrases from the articles stood out for me: facing hard realities, perseverance, liminality, refounding, transformational change, new opportunities. Each of the authors has used these words within a certain context. While respecting that context, I would like to take some latitude with these words and reflect on them in light of the times and this particular season in which we find ourselves.

Fall is a season of change. It's a transitional time. We set aside the easier pace of summer to begin again. The cooler weather brings a sense of hope in new beginnings as another academic or parish year begins. But these are not times when it is easy to wipe the slate clean and simply begin again. Rather, as the new season begins, we must rally ourselves to face hard realities: in the U.S. and world economy, in the life and ministry of the church, and in our communities and families.

Perhaps the virtue we need most is perseverance. As William Clark points out in his article, perseverance is more than endurance or stamina. "Perseverance implies a sense of fidelity to something that engages not just the mind, but also the heart." He suggests this definition of perseverance: "integrity sustained over time."

Another word that stood out was *liminality*. In her article on reconfiguration in religious life, Patricia Wittberg talks about the process of reconfiguration as a "liminal time." She describes liminality in this way: "Liminal periods, according to anthropologists, are breakdowns of predictable routines of thought and action. . . . [they are] unsettling and profoundly threatening." We are living in a liminal time. While we know where we have come from, we do not know where we are going. Some look for the certainty of past formulas, others predict that things will improve soon. No one

knows. But in the liminality there are new opportunities.

In many ways, the challenges that religious communities face today are a microcosm of the broader challenges of this time. In the other article in this issue on religious life, Ted Dunn suggests five elements that are integral to the refounding of religious life. He describes refounding as "a process of personal and communal conversion initiated in response to God's call to choose life." The elements he identifies can speak to all of us about both the practical and spiritual tasks that we face in this time of change. Let me cite each one and offer a question that we might reflect on personally and communally:

1. Transformation of consciousness: How has my vision of my life, my world, and my God been affected by these times?
2. Re-appropriation of your charism: As I listen to my inner voice, what is the unique gift that I have to offer at this moment of change?
3. Conversion and reconciliation: What is the wound in the deepest part of me that is limiting me, holding me back?
4. Experimentation and learning: What are my questions?
5. Prophetic vision: What gives me hope and energy for the future?

On the other side of liminality there is something new and different. Change is happening all around us. Will it be transformative or diminishing? Will we be the change we hope for?

Let us engage our hearts in this endeavor with "integrity sustained over time."

Robert M. Hamma

Robert M. Hamma

Letter to the Editor

27 July 2009

To the Editor:

In his engaging essay, "Strong Medicine: Health Care Practice as a Spiritual Discipline" (Volume 30, Number One [Spring 2009]), Daniel Sulmasy explores the interface of health care and spirituality, arguing that health care is a "spiritual practice" because "illness ineluctably raises troubling questions of a transcendent nature" (page 10). Furthermore, he suggests that "if health care professionals are to heal patients as whole persons, they themselves must seriously engage the transcendent questions that only persons can ask" (page 9). I agree. How can we expect health care professionals to be spiritually attentive to their patients or clients if they themselves have not seriously engaged their own relationship with the transcendent? However, this question raises for me another question—one that pertains to spiritual formation: How can health care professionals seriously engage their own relationship with the transcendent—in a way that nurtures in them a deepening spiritual attentiveness in the midst of their clinical practice—if they have not been prepared, or spiritually formed, to do so?

For those who believe—along with Rahner in his Ignatian synthesis—that God communicates God's very self to us in all things, and that we have the existential gift (capacity) to respond to God, there is an objective sense in which the practice of medicine and any other health care profession (and indeed all human action) is an experience of the transcendent. For Rahner the transcendent is, of course, God. However, I may not subjectively experience my clinical work (or anything else for that matter) as a spiritual moment—even if I agree with Rahner. The likelihood that I will experience the practice of medicine (or any other health care profession) as a spiritual encounter rests, I believe, on the degree to which I have developed my gifts of a "contemplative attitude" and a language needed to describe the interior landscape that this attitude opens up to me.

As one who practices medicine and works professionally in spiritual direction and spiritual formation in the Ignatian tradition, I would argue that the contemplative attitude—the attentiveness to and discernment of the movements of God as Spirit in and through my interior landscape—and the language necessary for a physician (or any other health care professional) to interpret an experience in terms of her or his relationship with the transcendent is not something that happens without

some intentionality. While the contemplative attitude and the language of the heart may be existential gifts, they must still be received more fully. This unfolds by disposing oneself to receive the self that God bears to each of us through regular prayer, self-reflection (such as the examination of consciousness), spiritual direction, mentoring, and study (whether casual or formal). The contemplative attitude and its accompanying interior language must be practiced just as surely and consistently as a cellist must practice playing in order to receive more fully the gift of music-making.

Perhaps this is an area where those who form ministers and spiritual directors in the Catholic Christian tradition can offer something to those who train health care professionals. For example, might medical educators—particularly those working in medical schools and hospitals with historical ties to the Catholic Church—consider appropriate ways to nurture the formation of what I would call "the contemplative physician"? This is a physician who is receptive to being found by God in all things, capable of experiencing medical practice as a spiritual encounter by virtue of a developing contemplative attitude and a fluency in the language of the heart. This is a physician who is capable of "entering the patient's chaos" (a paraphrase of James Keenan's understanding of mercy in the Catholic tradition). This is a physician capable of opening the door to the transformation of the physician, the patient, and their potentially healing relationship. And this will not happen by accident. If having spiritually attentive health care professionals is something we as a society value, then we will need to consider what kind of spiritual formation will be needed to make this value concrete reality.

Sincerely,

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Refounding Religious Life

A Choice for Transformational Change

ed Dunn, Ph.D.



"Refounding is the work of divine initiative.
We do not refound our orders and congregations. God does."
-Diarmuid O'Murchu

At the time of writing this article the news is awash with our congressional investigations into the finance and credit calamities, the mortgage meltdowns and the bailout of the auto industry. Washington says it is willing to help with the proviso that companies demonstrate a willingness to transform themselves and reinvent the way they do business. If we are to come through this recession having been transformed, these companies along with the rest of us will need to make radical changes. If there is to be renewed hope in the American spirit it will have to come from a new, paradigm-changing vision, just as it did during the Great Depression with Roosevelt's New Deal.

The same might be said of religious life. If religious communities are to come through this era of diminishment, they will need to make more than incremental changes. They will need to be about deep and radical change. They will need to be inspired by a new vision and intent on transforming their lives. Some communities are choosing refounding for that very reason.

ORGANIZATIONAL CYCLES

All organizations go through cycles. In the business world, organizational cycles are well documented. So that we can better understand what causes any organization to diminish over time, let's briefly review what organizational life cycles look like.

Stage 1: Inspiration and Innovation

The birthing of a new vision is the cornerstone for any new organization. Often there is a charismatic leader who gives birth to a new vision with a burst of inspiration and energy. The leader's passion and dogged determination to actualize his or her vision evokes the same in others who are attracted to the cause. Undaunted by obstacles there is unwavering pursuit of the vision as the excitement of a new venture mobilizes those involved. *Inspiration* and *innovation* of both ideas and methods for carrying out the vision mark the early stages of any organization.

Stage 2: Rapid Growth and Experimentation

As this vision begins to take hold and others are drawn to it there is a period of rapid growth and development. Ideas, people, resources and projects accelerate exponentially. The system can barely keep up with the influx of new members, new ideas and new projects. Structures, organizational charts and projects are constantly being created anew as the venture builds momentum. *Rapid growth*, *experimentation* and *trial and error* learning are the hallmarks of this time in an organization's development.

Stage 3: Stabilization and Maintenance

Having found its stride and the means for carrying out a viable vision an organization begins to systematize, organize and stabilize. It seeks to maintain its success by institutionalizing its method with procedures, policies, structures and people who support it. Eventually the explosive growth slows to a steady pace. The organization has time to systematize its efforts preferring sanity, security and predictability over chaos. Offices and titles are stamped into the organizational

chart and behavioral patterns are stamped into the book of norms. *Stabilization* and *maintenance* of the status quo are hallmarks of this period.

Stage 4: Decline and Destabilization

The final stage of an organization's life cycle is decline and destabilization. The original vision loses its luster and participants lose their zeal. Inspiration and innovation are in short supply as what is predictable and controllable and manageable takes precedence over what is not. Those who offer a new way of thinking and the possibility for growth are judged and labeled disobedient, disloyal or crazy. The tried and true take precedence over trial and error and the organization stops learning, adapting and growing.

The system is struggling to survive. It seeks reassurance by writing well-polished mission statements carving statues and naming awards to honor its past champions. While it takes pride in past achievement and reminisces over the glory days, it is all the while calcifying and decaying. Having lost its root energy and divorced itself from contemporary relevance, new members are no longer attracted. New blood trickles to a halt cutting off a healthy supply of new energy, ideas and people.

Ironically a system begins to die by its own narrow focus on survival and its efforts to forestall the inevitable. It has come to value and has been designed to maintain what it has already accomplished. It places controls over innovation and experimentation so that adaptation to a changing world is prevented. Those who built and believe in the system are promoted and elected in order to keep it going. They serve and protect the system they believe in and unwittingly collude in its demise by preventing radical change.

CYCLES IN RELIGIOUS LIFE

In religious life, such cycles also exist. These cycles, well documented by Diarmuid O'Murchu Lawrence Cada and others, are depicted as natural occurrences throughout the history of religious life. According to these authors and sociologists, religious life has gone through many such cycles, each lasting some 300 years or so. Most communities, about 75%

According to O'Murchu, will become extinct. Some will continue in a kind of minimal capacity. And some will successfully refound, birthing a new way of living and beginning a cycle anew. The Jesuits, Franciscans, Benedictines and Ursulines are but a few examples of communities that successfully refounded centuries ago when death seemed all but imminent.

What's important to recall is that most communities in North America are in the latter stages of this normal developmental life cycle. In widening the lens a bit we can appreciate the fact that the dying of any one particular community does not make it an aberration. If you are in a community in its waning years, it is important to appreciate that your community is part of a larger movement and in good company. Your current situation is neither unique to you nor is it the result of some kind of systemic character flaw or improper planning. Most communities are now in this fourth stage and no modern-day, sizable community has yet to claim public victory in their refounding efforts.

TIME FOR HARD CHOICES

This critical period of decline and destabilization is evident today: diminishing numbers, advancing age, few if any new vocations, increased tensions between the demands of maintenance and the call to mission, a smaller pool of willing and able leaders, and actuarial tables that only project a continuation of these trends. By all accounts there are less than half the number of men and women in religious life than in the late 1960s. The trends in your own community are likely to be similar.

Some communities are in denial, some are in crisis and some are mired in chronic pain. In the midst of aging and diminishment, some are biting the bullet and making the hard choices. Some communities are *reconfiguring*, joining with other communities with a common charism. Some are *restructuring* their governance as well as reorganizing, downsizing and simplifying their efforts. Some are redoubling their efforts to *recruit* new vocations. Some are *regressing* and returning to ways of the past in the hopes of solidifying their identity and attracting new

And some are choosing refounding believing that only this, the most radical of all options, can transform their lives anew.

members. Some are *retiring* and planning their legacy. And some are choosing refounding believing that only this, the most radical of all options, can transform their lives anew.

Communities who are choosing refounding are doing so for different reasons. Some choose refounding over restructuring believing that changing the structures of governance does not, by itself, address the root problems. Some choose refounding over reconfiguring because they believe it is better to strengthen their identity, rather than lose it through union or merger. Others choose refounding over efforts to get new members because they believe religious life, as it exists now, truly needs to die in order to be transformed.

Many choosing refounding believe that reconfiguring or pursuing new vocations will not, by itself, resolve the underlying problems any more than having another child or building a new house will fix a troubled marriage. Some have argued, for example, that reconfiguring only creates a gerontocracy, a larger group of predominantly elderly members with no proportional change in youth available for leadership or external ministries. Some do not wish to invite new vocations until they get their house in order. Suffice it to say that while communities are choosing refounding for different reasons, they all desire a similar outcome—to transform themselves anew.

The time, energy and resources needed for radical change are running out. Perhaps for some communities the window of opportunity has already closed. In 1979, Lawrence Cada said this period would last 40 years in

The dual commitments of grieving what must die while birthing a new way of being are essential for embracing this expression of the paschal mystery called refounding.

total and had another 15 to 20 years remaining from that time. David Nygren and Miriam Ukeritis said in 1992 that a ten-year window remained. By either account, the window has closed. More hope is offered, however, by O'Murchu who, in 1998, suggested that the period of transition for communities choosing refounding is still another 70 years down the road.

Whose prognostications are correct remains to be seen. Regardless of the odds, communities at a crossroads will stand a better chance if their choices are proactive. The road ahead is challenging and the statistics are daunting. If history repeats itself, only 25% of all communities survive this period to see a new cycle. Each community must decide if it will be among the 75% that become extinct or will be among the most courageous and innovative communities risking it all to claim a future full of hope.

REFOUNDING AND WHAT IT REQUIRES

What is refounding and what does it take to be successful in such an endeavor? In surveying the literature one quickly discovers that very few authors have written specifically and comprehensively on the refounding of religious communities. Gerald Arbuckle and Lawrence Cada are two notable exceptions. Vatican II, of course, put forth a vision for renewal and many prophets have since challenged, encouraged and refashioned this vision. Sage spiritual leaders like Joan Chittister, Diarmuid O'Murchu, Michael

Crosby, Barbara Fiand, Sandra Schneiders, Margaret Wheatley and Patricia Wittberg are a few of these visionaries.

It is from surveying these prophetic authors, as well as from my own journey with communities as a facilitator and consultant, that I offer this synthesis regarding what refounding is and what it takes to embrace the journey. While I make no claim to have definitive answers, I respectfully submit the following departure points for ongoing reflection and to aid those on the pilgrimage of refounding.

Communal refounding is a process of personal and communal conversion initiated in response to God's call to choose life. It is a commitment to journey as a faith community into the dark night of the soul intended to transform minds, hearts, spirits and behaviors. It is a commitment to wrestle with the forces of sin and grace, life and death, as well as with the gift and shadow-side of a community's charism. It is a process that unfolds amidst the unending call for reconciliation and redemption.

Communal refounding involves a transformation of consciousness regarding a community's charism and its relevance for today's world. This paradigmatic shift in a community's basic assumptions and operating values opens the door for creating a new vision. Experimentation with and development of new mindsets, heart-sets and skill-sets are requisite for carrying out this new vision. The dual commitment of grieving what must die while birthing a new way of being are essential for embracing this expression of the paschal mystery called refounding.

This working definition can be broken down into five elements.

FIVE ELEMENTS OF REFOUNDING

Element 1: Transformation of Consciousness

Deep change rattles the windows through which we gaze upon our world. Our worldview, the fundamental ways in which we understand our life, our world and our God, must come into question as we travel the road to refounding. For refounding to occur, these paradigmatic shifts in consciousness must take place if a new vision, filled with hope and passion, is to be born. Communities pursuing refounding are

searching for entirely new ways of understanding their charism, mission and life in community. There are many prophets who offer new lenses from which to re-imagine the future of religious life and, by doing so, offer an opportunity to transform the consciousness of those on a refounding journey.

Joan Chittister says of religious life that it "must be about seeing what others do not see or saying what others may not say, for whatever reason, at whatever price." Sandra Schneiders tells us, "Religious people are called to be citizens of whatever place they inhabit, children of the cosmos who do not recognize any absolute claims except those of God and hence can transcend the artificial boundaries humans have introduced to divide up land, resources, peoples, and even religion itself." David Courturier emphasizes the "relational economy," based upon a theology of abundance, principles of mutuality and equality, and participation in compassionate collaboration. John Dear's call to non-violence offers a new lens for the Gospel.

All of these scholars and theologians reframe our theology and worldviews, pouring yesterday's wine into new wineskins. Each community has its own prophets as well, those on the edge of change who march to the beat of a different drummer. They go about their ministries with tremendous zeal making a profound difference in the lives of those they serve. Sadly, they are often pariahs in their own community, dismissed as disloyal or crazy. But these are the voices of the future offering a new consciousness for refounding.

The invitation of refounding is to explore and reflect upon these new possibilities in order to discover how these might transform your collective consciousness. Listen to the visions that resonate within the hearts of your members, bringing new meaning to your charism and new purpose to your mission. Surely voices such as these offer intimations of the future.

Element 2: Re-appropriation of Your Charism

While deep change transcends the past, it is also rooted in the past, but in a radical new way. Communities on a journey of refounding do not sever all ties with the past. Instead, a refounding community is radically, dangerously and newly committed to their root energy, but with a new twist. With a newly

What is your collective inner voice saying to our world that is both authentic and manifests integrity as evidenced by your actions?

transformed consciousness, re-appropriating your charism takes on a whole new meaning.

Rootedness and radicality are a paradox. The key to combining them is not more study of your history books. It is found in appreciating your charism as a reflection of your collective inner voice and not merely the voice of your founder who first proffered this gift to the Church. When your collective voice speaks to the world it carries the voices of all those members living and deceased that helped to shape it, not just your founder. In a very literal sense, it is a gift that keeps on giving, ever changing and evolving.

The rootedness of this inner voice will be found not in the pages of history, but in your authenticity. It is being rooted in knowing, grounded in claiming and made genuine in speaking from the depth of your soul. The radicality will be found in your integrity, your courage to act in accord with this voice to further the reign of God no matter the cost. In this way, re-appropriation of your charism comes down to re-claiming your community's authentic inner voice while acting with integrity in response to today's world.

But herein lies a dilemma. What is your collective inner voice saying to our world that is both authentic and manifests integrity as evidenced by your actions? As Ghandi suggests, "We must become the change we want to see in the world." Who do you say you are to the world and how do you demonstrate this behaviorally? Refounding is an attempt to answer that question and become the change you want to see in the world.

Saying what you believe and acting accordingly as one community is no easy task, especially when members are at odds regarding their most fundamental beliefs. Suffice it to say that community members are not of one mind or heart around many bedrock issues, be it the vows, women's ordination or the Eucharist. Yet it is not the diversity of opinions that is the problem. Rather, it is the inability to work with this diversity directly, overtly and constructively that is the problem. The fear of judgment, reprisal or eruptions of unmanageable conflict makes these issues too hot to handle. So communities table the conversations and agree to disagree. Consequently, the community's inner voice is silenced, its authenticity and integrity destroyed.

Thus, if communities are to journey into refounding they must reclaim their authentic inner voice and act in accord with it. In order to do this, they must deal directly with the very real conflicts that exist around Eucharist, women's ordination, vows, power and authority. They must work through (not around) these conflicts in order to arrive on the other side as one, whole, reconciled, re-authenticated voice supported by their actions. This is what it takes to re-appropriate your charism.

Element 3: Conversion and Reconciliation

A community without pain will not become a refounding community. No one chooses the tumultuous road of deep change without the driving force of deep pain. Pain is the catalyst that pushes us to take a good hard look at ourselves and search for what needs to change. This search, among the faithful, is what invites us back to God and one another. As a result we are brought to the road of conversion and reconciliation, the very crucible of refounding.

Once pain is publically acknowledged communities try a number of methods for dealing with it. Feeling demoralized and frustrated from repeatedly naming their pain, but not getting through it to resolution, some communities attempt to put a moratorium on its further discussion. Some communities may attempt a healing ritual or make renewed promises to love, respect and trust one another. Other communities have tried offering voluntary, weekend workshops to learn how to better communicate. I have not yet seen or

heard that any such efforts have transformed a community steeped in pain.

Communities that wish to heal their brokenness reconcile their woundedness and experience genuine conversion must go through the same arduous process as any other individual, couple or group seeking wholeness and healing. There are no shortcuts. Such processes are familiar to all who have experienced conversion and involve several of the following components

- Turn inward and engage in utterly honest and very painful introspection in order to reclaim truths that have been left unearthed or unintegrated.
- Strip away the layers of defenses that keep our wounds, and the painful truths they conceal, from our own awareness.
- Risk further injury by courageously turning toward others we have long since turned away from, whether because of an injury we caused them or injuries we experienced because of their behavior toward us.
- Cease from blaming others for our pain and take responsibility for our own healing and for companioning others in theirs.
- Put down our need to justify our actions and admit the naked truth of our failures.
- After honest searching, shared exploration, mutual empathy and compassionate understanding, do the work of self-challenge as well as challenging others to stretch and grow into new behaviors.
- Likewise offer and receive expressions of forgiveness, atonement or restitution.
- Only after such direct conversations, try out new behaviors and allow others the same in order to create new patterns, new growth opportunities and new foundations of trust.

Refounding is a journey through the dark night of the soul. It is the most painful and necessary work of all. Nothing less will bring about deep and lasting transformational change. It is the crucible of refounding.

If communities are to keep themselves from becoming fossilized, they must find new ways to evolve. To become a learning community it will be essential that you feel safe with one another. You'll need to feel life enough to admit that you do not have all the answers, a difficult acknowledgement for educated communities. You'll need to be more tolerant of mistakes and view these more as learning opportunities rather than as failures or flaws. You'll need to have the freedom to fumble in trying out the new. You'll need to let go of your need to look accomplished and professional and become instead neophytes and novices again experimenting with new approaches.

A spirit of experimentation and inquiry along with trial and error learning will be essential. A different approach to mission and ministry will be important. Trying out new community life forms and structures as well as new forms of membership will be important. Walking the talk in a new way and trying out new behavioral patterns that are more congruent with freshly claimed values will also be important. Experimentation with new values and concomitant behavioral patterns will be essential if refounding is to become more than just words.

ement 5: Prophetic Vision

The purpose of refounding is ultimately not for self-service, but for claiming a new vision with new energy to further the reign of God. A new vision fueled and informed from the fires of conversion will acquire profound energy and ownership. Additional buy-in will come from the sweat-equity earned by your collective involvement in your efforts to refound. A new vision, born of your inner voice, will give integrity to the word prophetic.

Prophetic visions will not be found on the shelf of yesterday's prophets, borrowed from a book by acclaimed authors or replicated from the visions of other communities. A great vision is built up over a course of time, through accumulated wisdom and a growing resolve to make it real. It does not come all at once, but acquires its strength by taking one next best step after another. With each step taken, more hope and ownership are engendered. At the end of the day it

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will only be realized if its resonance with the community's soul is matched by the courage of its members to live it.

I believe that if a new vision is going to be prophetic, it will require the full efforts of both leaders and members as partners. Ira Chaleff, in a book entitled *Courageous Followers* offers a helpful, reframed image of leaders and members as partners orbiting around a shared vision. In other words, instead of thinking of leaders as creating a vision and then leading the way while members follow along, think of leaders and members as partners in the enterprise of visioning. In this way they both orbit around the vision, enabling, facilitating and empowering each other on behalf of the vision. To the degree you strengthen the partnership between leaders and members, you will strengthen whatever prophetic vision you claim during your refounding efforts.

THE LABOR OF REFOUNDING: WORKING WITH LIFE/DEATH DYNAMISMS

As we have discovered, despite having recognized the signs of diminishment and destabilization and having made the choice for life anew, most communities will not succeed. While they may wax eloquent about a new vision, most will simply not do the hard work of deep change required in order to bring their words into action. Instead, they will whittle away at the words that once inspired. They will chip away at the potential radicality of these words until only ornamental changes

In order to choose life we must
let go of what no longer gives life.

are left. They will wordsmith, argue over how and who, and lose sight of the why. They will resist the very change they say is essential with as much vigor as is their will to change. They will choose incremental over deep change and they will die a slow death.

The forces of life and death are continually at play. There are forces that lure us, push us and pull us toward life and there are forces that seduce us and tug us in the opposite direction. How you deal with these forces and exert your free will is the determining factor in your refounding efforts. The five elements of refounding we just reviewed are component parts of a spiraling journey. What moves us through the spiral is the dynamic interplay between these life and death forces.

FORCES OF LIFE THAT LURE US, PUSH US AND PULL US

I do not know of any individual or congregation that can sustain the work of conversion or transformation without the profound *lure* of love. Why else would anyone go through such an ordeal? And never are we so lured as when we, and the relationships that matter to us, are broken. No longer able to stand on our own two feet, we hear more clearly the great love of God. Our yearning grows stronger in response to the invitation: "I am going to lure her and lead her out into the wilderness and speak to her heart" (Hosea 2:16). It is by the luring love of God, your love of community and your yearning to make things whole again that you will gain the strength to step further into the spiral of refounding and journey back home once again.

What *pushes* us are realities we can no longer escape. For most, it is the diminishing numbers, advancing age, and maintenance responsibilities that cast a larger and larger shadow over mission. What pushes most is the fact that funerals outnumber new vocations twenty to one, that the pool of willing and able members available for leadership is shrinking that you have more building space and property than is utilizable or justifiable. What pushes a community is the brokenness so many have named over and over and the pain that cries out for relief.

What *pulls* us toward life and spurs us on is our faith in the great mystery of life, death and resurrection. We know deep down inside that in order to be made real again, we must let go and let die what needs to die. We must surrender to the ultimatum of all tests of faith. In order to choose life we must let go of what no longer gives life. We must let go of the places, ministries and relationships we were once called to embrace because these were life giving but now no longer are.

FORCES OF DEATH THAT SEDUCE US

Yet, amid all the forces that lure, push and pull us toward life, there are forces of death and doubt that seduce us to choose otherwise. For example, we know that the truth will set us free and we simultaneously hide from it. Sigmund Freud knew this and every therapist since his day has known this. Our defenses and resistance to truths encapsulated in pain are as clever as they are varied.

Besides the anesthetizing armor we carry around, when push comes to shove we have a thousand reasons to justify our avoidance of painful issues and difficult choices. We gravitate toward the path of least resistance. Instead of doing the hard work we know is required, we say, "We're too old, too few, too poor, too busy, too set in our ways." "Too whatever" to change. We wait and postpone until the slippery slope of a weakening resolve carries us to inertia. We start enthusiastically and quickly grow weary and frustrated when more tangible results do not come fast enough nor coincide with our efforts. We want immediate payoff, quick relief. We are seduced by easy solutions. And yet we know that any life-changing

g endeavor like refounding is slow in coming and
erous work.

Dancing with the forces of life and death brings us
ck to the crucible of refounding, back to reconcilia-
on and conversion. There are levels of work here,
om personal to interpersonal to systemic. And, in
der for refounding to progress, each level will
quire its own work. Working with these life-giving
ad death-dealing forces will be the ongoing work of
founding. It is soul-work, the most challenging and
warding of all.

Our world will forever need refounding people. As
ffounding people you are the world's evolution in
tion. Intimations of the future of religious life are
ready in your being and will be made more manifest
r your ongoing work. May the God of surprises and
isdom be with you always on this journey.

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The Challenge of Reconfiguration:

New Opportunities for Religious Congregations



Patricia Wittberg, S.C.

As many religious congregations continue to shrink and age, their leaders and members are increasingly exploring whether to reconfigure themselves by merging with other provinces—or even with other congregations. The best choice is not always immediately evident. A reconfiguration or merger can simply maintain the status quo of the component congregations, or it may even be actively harmful to one or more of them. Only rarely, and only with the deliberate effort of both the membership and the leadership, will a reconfiguration spark a new re-founding cycle in the merged community. In this article, I hope to outline some of the steps that could make this happen.

“HARMFUL” MERGERS

First, however, we must look briefly at the alternatives. When might a reconfiguration actually be harmful to one or more of the merging congregations? The most obvious instance would be if a financially solvent group merged with one or more communities that are in a more precarious fiscal condition. It is true that the more Christ-like course of action may, in fact, be to share one's communal wealth with less fortunate congregations. It is also true that remaining selfishly aloof in one's own security while others suffer penury is soul-deadening to both parties and a scandal to outside onlookers. So a religious congregation may choose to take the objectively “harmful” step of merging with one or several less-solvent congregations, in the spirit of Jesus' admonition to rely on Providence and of the widow he commended for giving away her last penny. But such a reconfiguration poses obvious and frightening risks. If a congregation is reluctant to take this step, is it because its members are selfishly guarding their own comfort and security, or is it because they see how straitened financial circumstances would inhibit their future ability to respond to God's call? Careful discernment is obviously needed before such a merger.

Additionally, any reconfiguration—even the merger of provinces within the same congregation—usually reveals subtle (or not-so-subtle) cultural differences between the component communities. Some of these differences will have developed over time from the different personalities of the original founders of each component community and of all their subsequent leaders and members, from inherited ethnic practices, from having been located in different parts of the country, from being geographically dispersed instead of confined to a single diocese, or simply the dynamics inherent in having been large or small prior to the merger. Other differences may arise from recent history: a congregation which has had no new members entering for the past ten, fifteen, or twenty years may be more pessimistic about the future than another congregation which still has a few younger members. The congregation's members may expect frequent consultation with and visits from their leaders; a second congregation's members may instinctively resent being "checked-up on." Such unconscious assumptions and expectations, if not named and examined, may inhibit the successful melding of the merging groups into a genuinely new and unified community. Worse, the merged congregation may adopt its dysfunctional aspects of the component cultures rather than the functional ones.

None of these difficulties need necessarily preclude a successful reconfiguration—one that leads to a new dawn for the religious congregation in the twenty-first century. In fact, as I shall argue below, "harmful" mergers may actually be more beneficial than reconfigurations which merely prolong the status quo. But the dangers of reconfiguration do need to be recognized before they can be utilized as beneficial forces for true re-founding.

STATUS QUO MERGERS

This second type of reconfiguration may be the most common, simply because many religious congregations have merged out of economic practicality or sheer necessity, rather than out of a proactive vision for a new future. Merged congregations, after all, benefit from economies of scale: sharing retirement facilities, financial offices, and vocation/formation personnel. Some congregations have shrunk to the point that they no longer have a sufficient number of members under the age of 70 to serve in congregational leadership; for

them, a merger is unavoidable. Many reconfigurations, therefore, may spring more from the reaction to a congregation's *present* difficulties than from any concrete vision for its *future*. In such cases, both the leadership and the membership are often too preoccupied with the plethora of legal, financial, and nitty-gritty details which accompany merging to want to rock the boat any more than necessary. The median age of the merged community is not changed, and few, if any, lifestyle changes are initiated or expected of the members. Other than a broader focus in intra-congregational communications and more people attending community gatherings—now often held in a more distant and unfamiliar place—the day-to-day lives of the members remain as they were before reconfiguration. *This kind of merger will not lead to a viable future for the merged congregation; it will merely postpone its eventual dissolution.* That is why, paradoxically, "harmful" or difficult mergers, by shaking up the component congregations, may actually be better for their future.

THE GIFT OF LIMINALITY

Hidden in the financial uncertainty, the large and small cultural shocks, and the other disruptions of reconfiguration is a valuable opportunity. Religious congregations, like all human groups, inevitably settle into predictable routines. The same persons end up on the same preparation committees chapter after chapter. Living situations remain unchanged year after year, as stable dyads grow old together or as an ever-dwindling cadre of six, then four, then three religious serve in the same school for decades. Thinking outside the box, while valued in theory, is nearly impossible in practice because the box's walls are so taken-for-granted as to be invisible. There may be a handful of prophetic members with a consuming passion for ecological sustainability, feeding the homeless, or combating abortion/war/sexism or some other evil, but they do not all have the *same* passion. The rest of the community allows them their individual concerns, as long as they do not impose them on others.

Liminal periods, according to anthropologists, are the breakdowns of these predictable routines of thought and action. For a brief time, hierarchies and statuses are flattened, traditions are erased, and literally anything can happen. It is an unsettling and profoundly threatening time, and most cultures "tame" their liminality by confining it to a specific day (Mardi

In liminality lie the seeds
of true re-founding and the
future of the congregation.

Gras, for example) or life cycle transition (the puberty rites of some traditional cultures). When a liminal period breaks out unexpectedly—after a natural disaster, for example—all those involved try to restore normality as quickly as possible.

The reconfiguration of a religious congregation is a liminal period. Merging two or more communities will inevitably scramble leadership hierarchies; cultural differences will be brought into bold relief; taken-for-granted assumptions and traditions will be questioned; established friendship networks expanded. As with any other liminal period, there will be a strong temptation to re-establish a “new normal” as quickly as possible. This, however, is precisely what should *not* be done. In liminality lie the seeds of true re-founding and the future of the congregation.

How can religious communities proactively use the liminality of reconfiguration to make merging their congregations more than a simple continuance of an eventually dying status quo? Both leaders and members must first of all know what a liminal period is, and how to harness its ephemeral energies and prolong them into their new future. It will not be sufficient simply to sit back and assume that the creative ferment of liminality will automatically bring about something new after reconfiguration. The pressures to return to the status quo will be too strong. Nor is it sufficient for a single subgroup of the community—the leadership, the strategic planning committee, the vocations team, an interested group of rank and file members—to try to make something new happen by themselves. As I have noted in a previous article (“Leadership as

Administration: A Defense and Prescriptions,” *HUMAN DEVELOPMENT* 27, No. 4 [Winter 2006]), the leaders, the rank and file members, and the mid-level “staff” office of a congregation all have essential roles in initiating or facilitating change in their religious community. No one sub-group can do it alone. This is even truer in the case of reconfiguration: its liminality must be prepared for and carefully developed by all involved.

STEP I: PREPARATION

Reconfiguration-initiated liminality has one advantage over other events that may upend a congregation’s routine: it is usually evident several years ahead of time that a merger is going to happen. Therefore, the accompanying liminality can and should be *planned*. A reconfiguring community can anticipate that several persons will be freed from leadership after the merger; duplicated offices will be streamlined and combined; some extra financial savings may accrue. Allocation of monies will be in flux. Individual members with a particular consuming interest will now have like-minded compatriots in the other component congregations. There will be a large gathering of some sort to finalize and ritualize the merger—with all of the elevated enthusiasm and commitment such an experience usually brings. Congregational leadership and whatever planning committees exist should actively plan on how to mobilize these assets during the all-too-brief liminal time before traditional expectations and assumptions arise again and dissipate them into familiar channels.

The first step in planning for liminality is to locate the remaining points of life and enthusiasm that will exist in the new community after reconfiguration. Every member of each merging community should be personally contacted and encouraged to share their individual, personal vision of the charism. What gives each brother life? Where/how does each sister find God in her daily activities? What are each member’s specific dreams for his/her future? If a member of one congregation dreams of starting a Christo Rey school, organizing an ecological retreat center, or painting religious murals, are there members of the other merging communities with similar dreams? What barriers, if any, keep them from joining together? Of course, not every member of a congregation will have such dreams: many or even most will want nothing more

can to continue what they are currently doing without being bothered. Others will be physically or emotionally incapable of participating in a new endeavor. At least initially, the members with sufficient health, ability, and enthusiasm to commit all their energies to something new in the post-reconfiguration period will be relatively few. They are therefore precious assets, to be identified, nurtured, and linked both to each other and to the resources they need.

"Points of life" may also include present ministries that work well—a thriving clinic run by one congregation, a retreat center in another—or, at the staff level, they may be vocation techniques that are successful in reaching young people, or an especially good public relations office. In all of these cases, an essential preparation for the liminality of reconfiguration should be to create the human resources, the skill and knowledge resources, and the institutional resources which each merging congregation possesses and to begin strategizing how to connect them in synergy.

STEP II: IMPLEMENTATION

If this first step is adequately done, the membership of each component congregation will already have an idea that something new is afoot. They may have attended a day of recollection where they identified their gifts and passions. They may have filled out a survey. Ideally, they will have been personally contacted in a one-on-one meeting with a member of the leadership council or the planning committee in a "dream for the future" session. The second step will then involve linking together members with the same or complementary passions. This might be done from the ground up—encouraging like-minded members to connect across the merging congregations and develop action proposals for congregational support. Alternatively, the leadership council or a mid-level office or committee might proactively invite selected members to brainstorming or planning sessions. Either way, however, the danger exists that some interested members will be overlooked in the process. Ground-level connections may travel along pre-established friendship networks, excluding those outside. Leaders and planning committees, too, are human and used to thinking along familiar lines; they may confine their invitations to members who have been active in the past. To obviate this, some person or office should be specifically

Enthusiasm for a new venture
is not a zero-sum game.

charged with making sure that a personal invitation to participate in the new endeavor(s) is repeatedly offered to all the membership. Those responsible for intra-congregational communications will need to be given the responsibility for publicizing the progress of the new initiative(s) on a regular basis. Enthusiasm for a new venture is not a zero-sum game: as more and more information about the joys and trials, the successes and the challenges, of those active in the new initiative is made available to the rest of the congregation, additional members are likely to find the same passion awakened in their own hearts. Ongoing arrangements need to be made to locate these newly-enthusiastic members (who had ignored previous invitations), and to connect them to the initiative when and as their interest is piqued.

In addition to locating the individuals with fire and enthusiasm and connecting them with like-minded compatriots in the other component communities, some active facilitation needs to be done by upper or mid-level administration to help them develop their vision. In my previous article, I noted that such facilitation would include:

inquiring about, or even anticipating, [their] needs for secretarial assistance, equipment, informational resources, and/or released time from ministry and travel money for group meetings. . . . Another necessary component of facilitation is helping these intermediate

groups sustain their level of enthusiasm: by encouraging them to make retreats together, by funding their attendance at some conference of like-minded issue groups outside the congregation, or simply by affirming, funding, praising, and publicizing their efforts. Good administrative facilitation must be proactive; it is not enough to sit back and wait until an implementation group or office requests assistance. Sometimes it requires anticipating and providing assistance that the implementing group does not even imagine it needs, and then inspiring the group to greater and more creative efforts in using it ("Leadership as Administration: A Defense and Prescriptions," *HUMAN DEVELOPMENT* 27, No. 4, [Winter 2006] p. 38).

These activities, of course, require both time and money. The liminal period immediately after reconfiguration, however, is precisely the time when leadership personnel and funds saved from reduplicative efforts are the most likely to be available for new uses—and not yet spoken for by existing interests.

The whole idea at this critical juncture is to harness the emotional "high" left over from the merger celebration, the freed-up time and talent of former congregational leaders and planning committees, the building space vacated by merging infirmaries and offices, and to use these resources to catalyze and support new articulations of the merged congregation's shared charism through their first precarious years. Once liminality fades and things begin to settle down into a "new normal," however, the larger congregation needs to fulfill a third role: that of evaluation.

STEP III: ONGOING EVALUATION

If a congregation uses its reconfiguration to free up the energies of liminality for change and growth, then it will be necessary periodically to evaluate how well its efforts are succeeding. The dangers of merging will repeatedly conspire to derail truly creative initiatives. Members from different component orders, even if they share a common passion, may have divergent cultural expectations that inhibit their working together. Newly-merged provinces of an international order may

share approximately common cultures but find they are so thinly scattered across the entire country that a truly collaborative common effort would require a massive relocation of its most passionate members—a psychologically draining prospect. The monastic savings from merging offices will be quickly swallowed up by a plethora of competing needs. The large merged order will inevitably be less "homey" and intimate, which may depress some members' enthusiasm. Finally, those involved may be so committed to nurturing their dream for the charism—the spirituality center, Christo Rey High School, or inner-city health clinic—that they may fail to give equal attention to locating a new generation to whom to pass on the charism. If the new initiatives do not attract new members—vowed and associate—to the community, its reconfiguration efforts will have been in vain in the long run. If a new initiative falters due to unresolved differences or if an insufficient number of members are willing/able to join the new venture, reconfiguration will likewise have been in vain. Ongoing evaluation is needed to determine whether the allocation of community resources for an initiative is time, personnel, and money well-spent, as well as to recover from false starts and nurture incipient successes.

All of this has been rather abstract so far. In the following section, I will provide a few illustrations of examples of how the liminal period preceding and following reconfiguration might be harnessed to spark a true re-founding in a congregation.

EXAMPLE I. DEVELOPING A NEW MINISTRY

Scenario

Five separate congregations of the Sisters of Mary trace their origins to a single nineteenth century foundress. Now they are reconfiguring into a single community.

Preparation—Identifying Points of Growth

In preparation for the liminal period which will occur during and after their merger, the leadership of all five congregations convened a common "Open Space" meeting for the entire membership of all five congregations, inviting members to dream/brainstorm promising new or expanded initiatives. All sisters were strongly encouraged to participate; sisters in the various congregations' infirmaries were connected by video.

During the open space, several sisters discussed a common dream they had: beginning an organized Arts Ministry sponsored by their merged congregations. They began to identify who might be interested: a sister-painter in Community X1, a sister teaching sculpture at Community X2's college, two sisters in Community X3 who lead mandala-drawing retreats at a retreat center, a retired sister in Community X4 who went into photography. No sisters from Community X5 were present in this particular open space session, so no one knew whether any members in that community would be interested or not. At the end of the day, the group submitted its preliminary proposal to the meeting's conveners.

Implementation and Evaluation

The Sisters of X had set aside a fund to support planning activities for these initiatives. The artists' preliminary proposal was accepted for further development. This included:

Sending an invitation to all members of each congregation to attend a facilitated Arts Ministry Planning Workshop lasting several days. Scholarship funds were available for travel for those living at a distance. Agenda for the workshop included sharing the artistic interests and accomplishments of the participants, an input session and subsequent discussion on the spirituality of art, brainstorming about the practical needs (location, financial viability, mission outreach) of an Arts Ministry, and surfacing the names of other sisters who would be willing to join such an endeavor, and in what capacity. The leadership of the Sisters of X had set up a viability standard which had to be met for future funding/support of the proposal: At least 25 sisters would have to express preliminary interest by attending this planning workshop and at least 15 sisters would have to be willing to commit to active participation in the further planning. The workshop met these minimal criteria—barely.

Subsequent planning meetings of the core planning group, plus whatever other sisters could come to help. Each meeting was held in a different location, hosted by a different one of the merging congregations, in or near a possible site for the new

Often no answers presented themselves that did not involve a serious risk to the success of the project.

arts ministry. While several sites had possibilities, all also had liabilities. At the planning meetings, the sisters also met with representatives of each congregation's retreat centers, music ministries, communications offices, high schools, health care facilities, etc., to explore opportunities for complementarity and synergy.

- Ongoing updates on the progress of this and other initiatives reported to the congregations in their respective in-house newsletters.
- Planning a special ritual and commissioning for the Arts Ministry at the merger celebration.
- Evaluation Criteria: In addition to evaluating the practicality of the venture, a key point of consideration was how the proposed Arts Ministry would provide for outreach to potential new members—where were there young women who would be interested in spirituality and art? How could they be reached?

Dilemmas and Decisions

Even in the planning stages, several difficulties and dilemmas surfaced. Often no answers presented themselves that did not involve a serious risk to the success of the project. Some examples of these dilemmas included:

- Geographical location: The original plan had assumed that the Arts Ministry would be housed in a particular location. Choosing this location,

however, involved trade-offs between locations that each entailed distinct liabilities as well as advantages. Some of the most suitable buildings were located in areas peripheral to where most Sisters of X currently worked (thus necessitating more relocation and isolation), or lacked access to populations of potentially interested young people. More beneficially-located sites contained buildings that were not suitable or needed expensive repair. A few of the most interested and artistically talented sisters were tied (by aging parents, tenured college positions, health) to particular locations and would be unable/unwilling to participate if the ministry was sited elsewhere.

- **Cultural Assumptions:** For a large part of its history, Community X5 had drawn more working-class recruits than the other four communities. They were also the only one of the five merging communities never to have established a liberal arts college or a retreat center. This had resulted in a tendency for the members of this community to emphasize more “practical” and “down to earth” concerns over “less serious” things like art. Possibly as a result, the one sister in Community X5 who did professional-quality art, was considered a bit “far out” by the rest of her sisters. She had taught for several decades at a state university six hours away from the rest of the community, and lived alone in an apartment there. She had tenure there, and was unused to collaborating with the rest of the sisters.

It also became apparent that there were subtle differences in the kind of Arts Ministry the sisters from various X congregations envisioned. The sisters on the planning committee from Community X1, for example, envisioned a professional art studio working on commissioned religious paintings, sculpture, and the like. The sisters on the committee from Community X2 wanted a teaching center for high school and college students. The two sisters from Community X3 wanted a retreat center that would give arts retreats. One of the sisters from Community X4 wanted the ministry to reach out to the elderly through art

therapy. Some of the locations under consideration were more suitable for some of these foci and some for others. Privileging one sister’s vision would diminish the other sisters’ ownership of, and enthusiasm for, the project. And there was not sufficient money to develop all of them.

- **Complementarity:** Community X4 had the best communications/publications office, whose laity director was interested in working with the new endeavor. But Community X4’s facilities were the least suitable, and there were few opportunities for connections with local young women. Community X1 had a dynamic vocation director—and was one of only two X communities to have anyone currently in formation. The merging congregation had already tapped her to serve as full-time vocation director after reconfiguration. But she was not very interested in the Arts Ministry initiative. While most of the merging congregation had on-site retreat centers, not all were interested in collaborating with an Arts Ministry.

What decisions should the merged congregation make about a combined Arts Ministry—where to site it, who will take part in it, what to focus on, what evaluative criteria to measure success—or even whether to sponsor such an initiative at all? (The Reconfiguration Committee, after all, had several other applications to consider for support.) The possibility that an incorrect choice could doom the entire endeavor could be paralyzing, except that to do nothing would make failure inevitable.

EXAMPLE II. RE-VAMPING THE VOCATIONS PROGRAM

Scenario

The Brothers of Y have merged their three U.S. provinces into a single entity. This involved merging various staff offices, including three separate part-time vocation ministers, two of whom were exhibiting strong signs of “burnout.” The third brother was asked if he would be willing to be vocation director for the merged province. He was willing to do so, but he had some preconditions for using the reconfiguration as

talyst to restructure the Brothers' entire vocation program:

The program must be a full-time position and adequately funded. The third brother asked for a new budget line of \$50,000 per year.

The vocation director must have a re-written job description, emphasizing that he would be responsible, not for inviting or mentoring potential recruits himself, but for motivating and equipping every Brother of Y to do these things.

The entire order must mobilize to choose "inviting new members" as one of its principal foci.

The three merging provinces' leadership agreed to these preconditions.

Preparation—Identify Assets

The Brothers' leadership funded weekend workshops for all the membership at several locations around the country, organized around the NRVC "Opening Our Hearts and Homes" video. At the end of each weekend, each brother was asked to choose from a list of vocation activities—ranging from "I will pray daily for vocations" to "I will move across the country into an intergenerational vocation house"—which one(s) he would be willing to participate in. Pools of volunteers were created in each region where the Brothers of Y ministered:

Volunteers to represent the Brothers of Y on local diocesan vocation committees.

Volunteers to collaborate with the communications office to supply the diocesan (and secular) newspapers with stories about the Brothers of Y.

Volunteers periodically to help out at discernment weekends.

Volunteers to write lesson plans, plays, storybooks, songs, and other classroom aids for students at all levels to learn about the Brothers of Y and their founder.

Volunteers to maintain and update the Brothers of Y web page.

Volunteers to start and run one or several Brothers of Y blogs.

Volunteers to organize and/or help at events (Theology on Tap, Inner-City Plunges, Eucharistic Adoration Retreats, trips to West Virginia or New

The Brothers realized that they themselves had to change, as a community, in order to be ready to welcome young men who wished to come.

Orleans to rebuild housing for the poor) for high school- or college-aged young men.

- Volunteers to open their local community to young men for dinner and prayer on a regular basis.

The new vocation director also held several brainstorming sessions at Brothers' houses around the country to surface further ideas.

Implementation and Evaluation

The new vocation director held workshops for the Brothers, led by vocation directors from other communities which had been (relatively) successful at attracting youth, on topics such as how to invite young people, the spirituality of Millennials, and how to guide discernment. "Adopt a Brother/Adopt a Student" programs were established between the Brothers' infirmary and students in Brothers' high schools and colleges. Several of the more ambulatory brothers volunteered to tutor at-risk students, while several students visited the more infirm brothers. One brother who taught history in the order's college enlisted his students to do oral histories with the retired brothers.

At the same time, the Brothers realized that they themselves had to change, as a community, in order to be ready to welcome young men who wished to come. The brothers who were willing to move into intergenerational discernment communities (which often involved major uprooting in ministry and city of residence), began to take part in a series of intensive

weekends on "Becoming a Welcoming Community." On a practical level, suitable living facilities had to be found to house the discernment communities, once they were established.

Finally, the vocation director located brothers who had skill and interest in communications, and he arranged for several consultants to come and meet with them on ways of "marketing" the order to young men. This included a consultant on web page design, and one who specialized in "buzz" marketing among youth.

Dilemmas and Decisions

As with any human endeavor, difficulties and dilemmas soon surfaced. The vocation director had underestimated how much start-up money would be needed—possibly influenced by the fact that the provincial leadership had been aghast at the size of the first sum he named. There wasn't enough money to do the kind of advertising the Brothers really needed to do to appeal to technologically sophisticated youth. Additionally, mismatches surfaced in the number of brothers who were willing and able to form discernment communities and the locations with the facilities to house such communities. The brothers in one of the merged provinces, who had not had a candidate enter in over a decade, did not believe that all this fancy new stuff would really work, and served as a sort of "wet blanket" at community meetings about vocations.

Finally, some of the young men interested in joining seemed more conservative (e.g. in wanting to wear the habit the older brothers has mostly discarded), which alienated some of the community.

CONCLUSION

As these two examples show, reconfiguration and liminality is a potential resource that can be tapped to spark new and exciting endeavors in a merged congregation—initiatives that may spell the difference between life and death, growth and stagnation. But they are not a fail-proof guarantee. Religious leaders contemplating reconfiguration, and wishing to tap into these energies must expect that unanticipated difficulties will develop. It is my hope, however, that the prospect of setbacks and mistakes—even of failures—will not deter religious communities from harnessing the exciting but daunting potential of liminality inherent in reconfiguration. It is here that the future lies.



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REVISITING Perseverance

William P. Clark, O.M.I.



A lie-beam bonded into a building will not be dislodged by an earthquake;
so too, a heart resolved after due reflection will not flinch at the critical moment.
—Ecclesiasticus 22:16

In the *Theological Dictionary* compiled by Karl Rahner and Herbert Vorgrimler (Herder & Herder, 1965), perseverance is defined as “the continuance of the justified in the grace of justification, the virtue of the wayfarer which is authenticated by the acceptance of death.” In this sense, perseverance is a value to be esteemed and sought by everyone. Actual perseverance to the end is a special grace. It cannot be merited. As a gift of God it is simply something to be prayed for, a hope to be cherished.

There is a narrower understanding of perseverance which is the subject of this essay. It is the perseverance that is explicitly promised in the formula of religious profession of some congregations, and is implicit in the pronouncing of perpetual vows. It is also an essential element of the sacrament of marriage. In their exchange of vows, the partners pledge to persevere in fidelity to each other using phrases such as “until death do us part” or “all the days of my life.”

Perseverance must be anchored in
the most deeply held truth and love
of one's heart.

A DEFINITION OF PERSEVERANCE

In contrast to the words endurance and stamina, perseverance implies a sense of fidelity to something that engages not just the mind, but also the heart. Perseverance must be anchored in the most deeply held truth and love of one's heart. As a working definition of perseverance, I suggest "integrity sustained over time." It is "the glue of virtue," for the virtue of temperance is not constituted by particular or sporadic acts of temperance. It is only when a person perseveres over time in performing acts of temperance that s/he acquires a virtue.

A quote from Eric Severeid serves to further illustrate the relation of perseverance to other virtues. Years ago Severeid served as a kind of guru on CBS, concluding the evening news with some wise commentary or observation. One evening he spoke of "what counts in the long haul of adult life." He ended by saying, "The prime virtue is courage because it makes all the other virtues possible." I would suggest that it is perseverance as much as courage that makes all the other virtues possible.

Like all the moral virtues, perseverance consists in achieving a happy medium between extremes. As a virtue, perseverance is the medium between a rigid, mechanical, almost obsessive routine of practices and a complete lack of consistency in one's behavior.

PERSEVERANCE IN THE RELIGIOUS AND IN THE MARRIED STATE

In addition to including perseverance, the Christian vocations to celibacy and to the married state have much in common. Both entering into marriage and making a commitment to celibacy create facts that influence a person's future decisions and actions. Those acts of commitment, like all past actions, cannot be undone. A person can no longer act as if those facts did not exist. It is possible, however, to look at those acts in different ways. Persons can either continue to stand by their decision, or betray that decision. Both commitments can become more and more integrated into one's life or one can live one's life more and more independently of those commitments. Being unfaithful to those commitments remains a possibility. Because a person remains fundamentally free the future remains fundamentally undecided and undetermined. Opposite possibilities remain open. Which possibility becomes reality depends on decisions freely made.

Another parallel. A wedding day and a day of making a commitment to celibacy have this in common. Both may seem like the attainment of a long-term goal. In both cases it is a question of doing something one has usually thought about, prepared for and looked forward to for a long time. It is important to realize both are a beginning and a goal. Both represent entry into a life-long commitment, a challenge to persevere, the beginning of a fully committed life, not its fulfillment.

In both states of life, depending on particular circumstances, other commitments will evolve. What is essential is to keep any other commitments from developing which are incompatible with the fundamental commitment freely chosen. There are behaviors that are inappropriate for both married persons and for religious. Indulging in inappropriate behavior is not only a failure to practice a particular virtue but also a failure of perseverance.

PERSEVERANCE FOR BETTER OR FOR WORSE

For both married persons and religious the commitment is "for better or for worse." Difficulties are sure to arise in both states. Those difficulties do not provide a reason to neglect, much less retract, the

commitment. When a bride and groom pledge to love each other "for better or worse," they typically translate the phrase mentally "I hope it will always be for the better, but if the worse comes I will try to persevere." As those who have lived long in marriage come to realize that is not really the meaning of the phrase. Strange as it may sound spouses need the "worse" as much as they need the "better." In the "better" spouses learn the joy of loving each other. In the "worse," they learn to love unselfishly. The "worse" is the fire that purifies love of self-seeking. It is when misunderstandings arise in a marriage, when one person feels disappointed or even betrayed by the other that the real strength of love emerges and leads to forgiveness.

It is much the same for religious. In the "better," religious learn the joy of seeking God as persons bound to God in a special way. In the "worse," religious learn, as John Powell put it, "to love the God of gifts rather than the gifts of God." The "worse"—a difficult assignment, an unappreciative or unsympathetic superior, an incompatible community, a frustrating ministry—is the fire which purifies love of self-seeking and as a result the real strength of one's love of God emerges.

CURRENT DECLINE IN PERSEVERANCE

Among the many recent changes in society is the diminishment of perseverance as a value and a notable decline in its practice. This phenomenon is obvious both in regard to the married state, religious life, and the priesthood. Some 50 to 60 years ago it was relatively rare for anyone to leave after perpetual vows and even rarer that anyone left the priesthood. Those who left experienced a significant drop in their social standing in the Catholic community. In today's church, the social milieu which formerly supported perseverance has changed dramatically.

We might ask those who persevere, who do not leave their chosen state: Does perseverance mean not leaving? If that is all perseverance means, no one could be really sure of their perseverance until death. It also could mean perseverance could be something negative and empty, something passive, something simply endured.

Perseverance is more than just not leaving. It is not to be equated with dogged persistence, a rigid, jaw-clenched "stay the course at any cost" mentality. It is, rather, continuing in freedom to generously ratify one's decision to take vows. Being bound by vows does not destroy one's freedom. To be what one is by one's own choice is to be free. To continue to be what one is by one's own choice is to continue to be free.

Cardinal Paul-Emile Leger of Montreal expressed that idea beautifully in a letter to his priests. He wrote:

Fidelity must not be looked at as merely "not jumping the ropes." Nor is fidelity the hardness of habit, the dead hand of unenthusiastic perseverance. It is consent, reborn, renewed, in spite of changes in life, in spite of the novelty of situations. It is constant revitalization, spiritual renewal, a return and an approach to the first generosity, to the first giving. Fidelity is not a blind attachment to a single decision, much less to a principle. It is the unchanging gift of oneself to the person loved. The gift we made of ourselves was made to the living God, always present and constant in his love. The gift we have made is a gift we have been given (*NC News* December 20, 1966).

PRACTICE OF PERSEVERANCE

Persons must have an active care for the evolution of their life commitment. This care must be exercised at all levels of life—thinking, acting, choosing, understanding, reflecting, experiencing. A life commitment is not something made just once at some solemn moment of assent and then expected to remain static. Its real value and challenge are that it must be ongoing. No life stands still. In his book *Markings*, Dag Hammarskjöld noted a profound truth when he wrote: "Whatever distance I have covered does not give me the right to halt."

It would seem strange indeed if one's perseverance could only be assessed at the moment of death.

The real question about perseverance is this: Am I persevering now? What is it that I want to be faithful to? Am I doing here and now the things I pledged myself to do? The past cannot be undone. The future is something I cannot really know and control. We live in the present and it is for the present that we are responsible.

There is another phenomenon which needs to be considered when reflecting on perseverance. It is true of almost all decisions one makes that eventually they look as if they were made without sufficient information and understanding. That does not invalidate those decisions. If they were valid when made, they remain valid. If the validity of past decisions can be nullified by subsequent information and experience, then most decisions will lack validity as time passes.

There is a kind of retro-thinking that almost certainly leads to trouble. It is exemplified by the statement: "If I knew then what I know now I would never have made this commitment." Almost any decision can appear ill-informed in the light of subsequent information and experience. That's the way life is. It isn't something possessed all at once but something continually evolving and unfolding. Whether a person would or would not "do it all again" isn't the point. The point is whether or not one is actively pursuing the fulfillment of commitments that have actually been made. Concentrating on what one's life might have been and neglecting to pursue actively what it is will usually cause dissatisfaction and unhappiness. The beauty and depth of any vocation will only reveal itself to those who fully commit themselves to it. Bemoaning the limitations of choices imposed by one's own choice leads to resentment. Seeking to deepen a commitment and pursuing its possibilities leads to gratitude.

Persons with a healthy commitment to celibacy will see in marriage a beauty and goodness lacking in their own life. It is important to realize the opposite is also true. Persons committed to marriage see in celibacy a beauty and goodness lacking in their lives. For those who remain committed to their own vocation and to the pursuit of its possibilities the recognition of the beauty of the life they have not chosen leads not to envy or dissatisfaction but to genuine appreciation.

For both married and celibate persons there will surely come a time when the original optimism and

enthusiasm will fade and a seemingly barren world will be revealed. There will be times when the only reason for persevering is the commitment one has made to do so for life. Reflecting on the meaning and values of life is important. But reflection is not always enough. There are times when a person is just not able to think their way through life. Such times must simply be lived and thought about later.

Everyone wants life to make sense. But there are times when a person simply cannot discover or articulate the meaning of his or her life. When the life to which one is committed doesn't make sense, the commitment had better have a lot of meaning. Making sense out of life is an intellectual exercise. Committing oneself to a way of life is an exercise of the will. A.D. Sertillanges observed: "to persevere is to will; he who does not persevere does not will, he only plans."

ST. IGNATIUS ON COMMITMENT

In his rules for discernment St. Ignatius speaks of "unchangeable choices" which have been made validly and says since an "unchangeable choice" cannot be undone, no further choice is possible. This suggests that once a person has made a final commitment one should not continue to discern about vocation. This seems incompatible with current practice, with dispensations from priestly and religious celibacy and marriage annulments commonly available. In recent decades permanent commitment to the religious life and the priesthood no longer appear as unchangeable as they once did, while the erosion of the ideal of marriage as indissoluble began even earlier.

In regard to changeable commitments St. Ignatius suggests we are not to keep re-examining such decisions if they have been made "properly and in due order." That would seem to apply *a fortiori* to "unchangeable choices." The devil can wreak havoc by urging one repeatedly to question and to worry about choices already made. Once a choice is made "properly and with due order" to commit one's self to religious life or to the married state, constant second-guessing is inappropriate and usually harmful. The challenge is to live out that commitment generously not counting the cost, accepting all consequences.

Ignatius does seem to leave open the possibility that what was apparently an "unchangeable" choice

may have been made without sufficient knowledge and freedom. He speaks of such choices as "inordinate and very and erroneously believed to be a vocation from God." That seems to make Ignatius' thinking more compatible with current practice. The church exists in concrete and changing sociological and psychological environment. For that reason what can be "undone" has varied at different times in the church's history. Certainly the current sociological and psychological milieu has a strong impact on our thinking about changeability and perseverance.

IF PERMANENT COMMITMENT POSSIBLE?

What has changed significantly is the concept of what is unchangeable and what is not. Our contemporary experience of change and the ever increasing acceleration of the pace at which change occurs make the very concept of unchangeability seem archaic, if not devoid of meaning. That experience, together with several other factors, lead some to the conclusion that human beings are not really capable of permanent commitment. Consequently, for them, there is no such thing as an unchangeable choice.

Among those factors are the following:

- The contemporary emphasis on individual freedom.
- The widely accepted Sartrean notion that there is no such thing as an unchanging human nature.
- Our nature is determined by our free choices.
- Current practice which seems to undermine if not overwhelm the preaching/teaching about the indissolubility of marriage and the binding force of commitment to the priesthood and religious life.

While those factors are not sufficient to show the practical impossibility of permanent commitment they at least show clearly that fewer people are capable of permanent commitment than was formerly believed. However, to show that permanent commitment is possible one need only to appeal to an old principle: *Contra factum non valet argumentum*: No argument can prevail over a fact.

From the beginning of Christianity the possibility of permanent commitment has been modeled by followers of Christ. Threats, imprisonment, beatings—nothing could stop the apostles from their mission. They are portraits of perseverance (see Acts 5:12-42). Down through the centuries there have been innumerable martyrs who persevered in their commitment to Christ in spite of persecution, torture and mortal wounds. Our cemeteries are filled with the mortal remains of persons who have modeled perseverance either in the married state or as a priest or religious.

To put that a bit differently: the real challenge is not the performance of an heroic act, however beautiful, however generous, however noble, because every human act is by its very nature transitory. The real challenge is the heroism of an entire life of fidelity to one's commitment offered to God without measure, without reserve, without regret.

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Accountability—

and the Risks Involved in Its Pursuit

George Wilson, S.J.



Accountability is in. The Catholic faithful call for accountability from bishops for their actions in the sex-abuse tragedy. Citizens call for accountability from CEOs and hedge-fund managers for their profits in the wake of the economic meltdown for everyone else. Consumers call for accountability from oil companies with respect to prices, and from government inspectors with regard to the safety of our foods, bridges, and highways.

Accountability is one of the most sought-after values in our democratic society, closer to platinum than mere gold. It's associated with justice, that ideal state we forever seek and forever fall short of. No one would advocate its opposite, non-accountability: that the actions of people that harm others should be simply written off as "the way things are." Attention must be paid. Something must be done!

But though we bring accountability up so frequently, is what we are seeking all that clear? What do we mean when we say, "They should be held accountable"?

SOCIETAL ACCOUNTABILITY STRUCTURES

We can begin with the structures of our society. As a (relatively) civilized society we have—laboriously, with much trial-and-error over decades and based on norms established over millennia—fashioned broadly accepted norms for determining the deeds for which we will hold people accountable. And we have worked out the processes by which we will determine the standards for measuring accountability in each instance, as well as the consequences of failure. Think of things like prison terms and statutes of limitations and all the complexities involved in the simple term "due process." It's interesting to note that the word accountability, though neutral in itself, is always used in connection with bad stuff: with failure and breakdown and malfeasance. We don't say, "We're holding you accountable for all the *good* you did in office." The ledger—the "account" behind the word—seems to be written only in red ink.

In both civil society and the church we have constitutions and statutes at various levels that attempt to define roles and expectations of office holders, including acceptable levels of discretion in their application. We attempt to define what will happen to those who fail in the responsibilities they have accepted. All these standards and procedures are humanly constructed and therefore fallible. (Other cultures have addressed the same issues and come up with quite different standards of accountability. In some cultures if you steal a spoon you may soon be missing a hand.) The norms can always be improved upon, and we must continually work at that improvement. Think of the death-penalty debate. At best our norms will only approximate the ever-receding vision of perfect justice, whether in their formulation or their application to actual human situations.

THE HUMAN AGENTS OF ACCOUNTABILITY

But societal norms and standards are only one aspect of accountability, even if they enjoy solid consensus. I have often marveled at the way leaders (or those aspiring to be leaders) will trot out the old bromide, usually with some huffiness: "*We are a nation of laws.*" It suggests that our systems of justice are never arbitrary, that the mere existence of laws guarantees justice. The badge is used to put down people who might argue that things are not so neat. The slogan is arguably one of the greatest sophistries ever foisted on the unthinking. To expose the deception involved is not really all that difficult. Have you ever heard of a law that was self-enacting? Or self-administering? No, the hard truth is that, no matter how well calibrated our efforts at determining norms for achieving justice, whether in civil society or in the church, their execution, or even the process by which the standards themselves are arrived at, always depends on human agents. On people, or to put it more bluntly, men and women much like me and thee.

And that fact opens a whole different set of questions.

PERSONAL PURSUIT OF JUSTICE

The societal pursuit of ever more adequate measures of justice, whether civil or ecclesiastical, is one thing. The dynamics by which *individual humans determine what will satisfy their own personal desire to see justice done* are something else. The answer to that

At best our norms will only approximate the ever-receding vision of perfect justice.

question takes us inevitably (and in some instances, tragically) into the tangled world of the human psyche, where there lurk all sorts of spirits. Some benign, but others not so.

What outcome will satisfy a victim's desire to "hold them accountable for what they did to me"? Or, for that matter, what does "held accountable" mean to an individual judge in the case; a jury member; a friend of the victim; an advocate on his or her behalf? Or anyone who feels personally affected by the outcome? The issue here is not some abstract societal norm but the satisfaction of a personal want, what we might call *psychological* justice, whether the "they" who inflicted the harm is a CEO, a government bureaucrat, a bishop, a spouse, a sister, a brother, or simply a garden-variety "neighbor."

What calls for exploration and spiritual discernment is not justice as the *object* of our personal desires and attitudes but rather the spirits at work in shaping those desires. And the lengths we are willing to go to satisfy them.

The experience of being unjustly treated is ordinarily accompanied by feelings of anger. When victims perceive a serious violation of their personhood, those feelings may escalate to the level of rage. And of course such feelings may be quite appropriate, perfectly mirroring the severity of the violation. Readers of this journal will surely concur that no one should ever be blamed for the feelings they experience. They are the way a healthy psyche registers its initial response to events. But what we do in the face of our feelings is something else. It raises an entirely different issue than the creation and administration of societal prescriptions.

A PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

I am frequently reminded of a couple who asked if I could help them with a serious conflict in their relationship. The wife discovered evidence that her husband had been having an affair with his secretary. (The genders of the parties are incidental and could have been reversed.) When the wife laid out the facts that supported her suspicions, the husband protested that he had not in fact been unfaithful. I then asked the husband whether his wife's conclusion was, if deniable, at least reasonable. Did the concrete details possibly lend themselves to such an interpretation? When the question was placed that way, the husband—a pleasant surprise—allowed that although he had in fact not been unfaithful the facts *could* lead a reasonable person to that conclusion. Her judgment was plausible.

In my innocence I sensed a hopeful breakthrough: the husband was genuinely forthcoming and prepared to apologize at least for giving the *appearance* that he had strayed. Maybe the conflict could be resolved amicably.

Alas, in my search for a harmonious resolution I had jumped too quickly. Upon hearing his openness to admitting, if not guilt at least indiscretion, his wife immediately blurted out, “Yes, but what about the way you took our money and went off to gamble it away in Vegas without telling me?” And we were off chasing another in what turned out to be an unending list of his failings. It took only a short time before it became quite clear that *nothing* he could say would satisfy her. In the face of each of his apparent efforts at apology she would pivot to another charge. She had him in a stranglehold and was not going to let him up for air.

The effort at healing was futile. She was already beyond the point of receiving repentance. Whether she ever actually acknowledged her true state and acted upon it by divorcing him (or else stayed married so she could pummel him endlessly in return for the pain of her suspicions), I never found out. But the experience helped me to formulate for myself a difficult question: *when does the appropriate search for justice—for “accountability”—become transformed into the zealot’s search for sheer revenge?*

AN INSATIABLE APPETITE?

Feelings of anger in the face of an experienced injustice are appropriate, as we have seen. Ideally—that

is to say, if the laudable goal of accountability is the only thing at stake—they would lead to actions that are precisely tailored to correspond to the failure of the perpetrator. No less but also no more. As Gilbert and Sullivan’s *Mikado* puts it (with tongue in cheek, to be sure):

My object all sublime
I will achieve in time
To let the punishment fit the crime,
The punishment fit the crime.

It all sounds very objective and impersonal. Just seeking justice, you know. This crime, this fitting punishment. But the following stanza reveals an attitude that is, if still comical, slightly more wicked:

To make each prisoner pent
Unwillingly represent
A source of innocent merriment,
Of innocent merriment.

It turns out that his delight consists not so much in the fact that impartial justice will be done as that the perpetrator will be personally ridiculed. It begins to sound rather like revenge: satisfaction of the original anger will come only from seeing the perpetrator suffer the same pain as the victim did. Words like “retaliation,” “retribution” or even “vendetta” are close at hand.

It turns out that anger, even when it is objectively warranted, can be spiritually dangerous. It is much like a rushing river, with an inherent tendency to expand beyond its legitimate course. A stream that began with clear protective banks picks up momentum from other unrelated sources. It gains strength, and soon it becomes a torrent which knows no boundaries and destroys everything in its path.

In the case of serious personal violation it can require heroic character—and divine grace—to keep the desire for satisfaction from becoming a thirst for revenge. The message, though normally not spoken (or even acknowledged), becomes: “I’ve been hurt and my need won’t be satisfied until I see you suffer just as I did.” The criterion is no longer satisfaction of an impersonal balance, but rather the desire to see another suffer personally.

It is not easy to define exactly when the apostle of justice becomes an avenging angel. Doubtless the process takes different form for each individual, given their varying histories and contexts. But from experience we may extract some of the signs that the virtuous search for accountability has been corrupted.

First, the attention shifts from fulfillment of a defined societal norm to a focus on the perpetrator: not "crime shouldn't pay" but rather "make him (or them) pay." Another indicator, illustrated in the story of the couple above, would be the rejection of successive efforts at a reasonable resolution: the judge was biased; the statute was outdated; or the procedure was faulty; or the judgment was delayed; or the accused was treated too leniently. The societal structures for achieving a satisfactory resolution—for accountability—are spurned. Visible human efforts are not enough, only utopian perfection will do. And of course that will never be reached. The aggrieved victim then stands outside the boundaries of human community, unreachable and unfree, in the maelstrom of consuming passion.

One of the things that can be going on in the thirst for revenge was illustrated in the image of the flowing river. What was implied in the reference to those "other, unrelated sources"?

We are all products of our whole life-story. Without consciously intending to, we bring to the interpretation of each present event comparable experiences from our past, whether joyous or painful. The tragic implication is that it can be very difficult to contain our response to a present hurt. It is easily "contaminated" by the residue of other hurts from the past. The present then carries all the symbolic power of prior events that are really unconnected to it or even long "forgotten." The practice of remaining totally in the present turns out to be a demanding discipline, if not a utopian ideal. The unresolved past claims its due even as its fingerprints are all but impossible to discern.

The story often reaches its sad conclusion when the victim becomes the victimizer. The apostle of social justice becomes the reincarnation of Genghis Khan. The next cycle begins. Thomas Merton used to quote Augustine to the effect that the weapon with which we would attempt to destroy the enemy would pass through our own heart to reach him.

Violence experienced becomes violence re-enacted. Perhaps not physical violence, but violence for all that. All too often we become that which we fight. You can't wrestle a tar baby and remain pristine.

PROTECTION IN COMMUNAL VULNERABILITY

So where does all this leave us? For all its accompanying hazards, accountability remains a goal worthy of our best efforts. It is the isolated individual who is most at risk of succumbing to its in-built hazards. It seems that the best safeguard against its transformation into a consuming thirst for revenge lies in personal vulnerability within a supportive but challenging human community. We all need the foil of healthy exchange with people who can challenge our limited perspectives if we are to keep our legitimate passions focused on their proper object. Whether that takes the form of a spiritual director or counselor, a support group, or simply a friend or circle of friends who can call us to account, the underlying principle remains the same. The integrity of our search for accountability will be measured by the degree to which we can allow ourselves to be held accountable for our own behavior. Jesus reminded us that stones are always too available.



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FACING THE **HARD** REALITIES

Mary Gurley, O.S.F.



On a Monday, two weeks before my sixty-fifth birthday, I opened the mail and discovered my Medicare card. Though I knew that the card would be coming, I was ignoring the turning pages of the calendar as I adamantly told myself that it was only a card. I held firm in my resolve to be in charge of navigating the Medicare event. On the fateful morning of my birthday, I planned to put on a black outfit and pin on my Medicare card in an elegant plastic, conference-like name tag. It would be my only “dramatic” concession to the sixty-fifth birthday event. I was determined that nothing within my world would change. Besides, at my age, I was much too young to worry about aging and a Medicare card was only something to add to my wallet. My bravado, however, didn’t last long.

AN UNEXPECTED CHANGE

Two days after receipt of the card, I was sitting across a table talking with a trusted sister who was in leadership in my religious congregation. She had driven three hours to talk with me—in gentle terms—about my “memory slippage” that she and others had noted. I had always trusted her judgment, but now I thought she was the one who was slipping! Ordinarily I can pick up on clues quite rapidly. In this event, however, I was at a total loss. I heard the words, listened to the references and experiences that she and other friends had noticed, and then I promptly denied every article piece by piece. Nothing of the information I was being given had any relevance to me.

Somewhere deep down, however, I knew that I wasn’t my best self in my current responsibilities and ministry. After years in collegiate education, preparing teachers and serving in high-level administrative positions, I was now the administrator of a small, comfortable, isolated nursing home facility dealing with bills, insurance, personnel payroll, and anything else that came into the office. Such tasks were not my forte even in the best of times. Indeed, it was an adjustment and a stretch for me to move from busy college life with the exuberant energies of undergraduate students and the sophisticated nonchalance of graduate students to administrator of a small group of retired religious women in advanced age.

Eventually I calmed down and listened to what my colleague was asking of me. I agreed to go for medical tests, even if only to put the issue behind me. I was positive that the end result would be to show she had made a colossal mistake. As it happened, it was only the beginning.

JOURNEY INTO UPHEAVAL

Summoning all the fortitude I could muster, I contacted a team of neurologists and made an appointment for an evaluation. Painfully, the appointment couldn't take place before a full month had passed. It felt like eternity. In that space of time I agonized about the whole situation. Some days I cried when no one was near me; other days I was convinced that it was all a mistake; and on a few days I was my clear self. Through it all, I found myself analyzing everything I said or heard and I began to question my mental competence. It was a silent nightmare for me. I had a sense of betrayal of myself, of who I was, and who I might become. Only one other person knew the upheaval that I was experiencing; in the presence of every one else, I silently struggled to remain steady and focused.

Fortunately I was able to gather myself for the day of my medical appointment. I took care to be professional in my appearance, a shield against what I might hear. Four hours later, having endured an overwhelming marathon of oral, written and medical tests, I was given another appointment for a month later at which time I would be given answers.

It would have been wonderful if that month were positive. It wasn't. As a classroom teacher of many years and even more years as a university professor and administrator, I knew how to decipher and evaluate some of the tests the doctors had used. I knew what they were probing in their questions. In fact, I had considered responding to many of the questions in a manner such that I would be in control of the procedures. Fortunately I rejected that urge and I cooperated completely with the testing. I knew deep down—in the office and in the month of waiting for the diagnosis—that the outcome of the diagnosis would not be good news.

The second visit to the neurologists was only three hours in length though equally intense. I listened to the read-outs, asked questions about the various tests that had been given earlier, and had conversations with

the doctors about current and future health issues. It was all very civilized and proper and cordial. I knew exactly the ramifications of the diagnosis. Fortified with all my courage, I thanked the doctors for their professionalism and their time. I left with a smile, headed to my car, and spent the next half hour crying. I had been diagnosed with the beginnings of Alzheimer's, mild cognitive impairment the doctors said, but Alzheimer's all the same. Just a few weeks since I had joked about Medicare, a somber page had been turned.

MAKING THE WORLD MY OWN

I no longer think of the diagnosis as somber, though it took me awhile to grasp the whole spectrum of the experience. I knew that I needed to have supportive friends with whom I could talk. Reticent by my own personality, this was a difficult step. Not knowing where and how I could share this burden, I recognized that in my religious community I have many, many good friends. These trusted "sisters" and I have walked similar paths since we were young. All it took then was a deep breath and a few deep trusting conversations. The result was amazing: listening, compassion, support and love. I was overwhelmed with the goodness of my friends and no longer felt alone. Gradually, as I read significant articles and began a mild regiment of doctor-prescribed medications, I found my way back to myself. The daily routines were once again "normal" or, as I like to say, I was once again in my own skin.

This journey into upheaval is by no means finished. Actually it's hardly begun. The familiar in my life has been turned around and the long term routines of my life have changed dramatically. Fortunately, and at a critical junction, another long-time trusted friend recited to me the words of writer Henri Nouwen who on the death of his mother wrote: "I need to learn anew how to make the world my own." "Given the parameters of your diagnosis," my friend said, "it might be profitable for you to heed Nouwen's advice and learn how to live in new circumstances." Great advice, but how does one negotiate such a complete turn around of life? For starters, I told myself that beyond my trust in the God I love, I needed to pay attention to at least three things: first, my own *acceptance* of the diagnosis; second, a *plan* for healthy living and involvement; and third, *support* from valued friends. Now, ten months into my "new life," I'm learning to take control of my triple plan and it seems to be taking root.

My first challenge, acceptance, came much more easily than I expected. Perhaps my strongest support was my own personal equation adopted for many years and for times when I had to face difficulties. Simply stated, when difficulties come upon me, I focus only on the problem at hand; the immediate issue; one day at a time. I try to concentrate on the work of today, not of tomorrow. This strategy has been working as it holds at bay all of the "what ifs" of the diagnosis and frees up energy for me to be in the wonderful present. At the same time, to take away the fears and keep me in charge of what I learn, I have tried to learn as much as I can about Alzheimer's.

My second promise to myself, a plan for healthy living and involvement, was an area that I had always pursued, but with little success. My patterns were typically three or more jobs at a time. Now, however, I began to learn the joys of change: i.e. doing one job at a time; deliberate time for a break; a sit down meal instead of an apple on the run; reading for the pure love of reading and most important, making time for friends. In this process of simple pleasures, I have found an inner peace and a broader world. The proscribed medicines are certainly at my side, but I believe that it was my new freedom in work and play that has been the better medicine.

Support from valued friends, the third commitment, has been pure overflowing gift. At first tempted to hide my Alzheimer's diagnosis, I somehow found the courage to reach out to selected friends, mostly those who have been my contemporaries and mentors and those who walked by my side for many years. Their support has been phenomenal. I've appreciated the

fact that their care for me is not unusual; it is simply continuance of their ongoing friendship that we have cultivated over the years. Life moves on at its own pace.

As I write this dialog with myself, I'm amazed that I hardly think now of what has happened in this single year. What began as a nightmare has softened into the daily responsibilities of my ministry wherein I don't feel anything ominous clouding my routines. Despite the Alzheimer's, my life is full. I have learned many new aspects of my current work: I offer my services four or five days a month to a university; I drive three to six hours to visit with family and friends; I read and write letters and follow the plethora of television news. I spend time with interesting people. In a word, I take my medicine each morning and that constitutes the split-second time that I let myself reflect on what is happening in my brain.

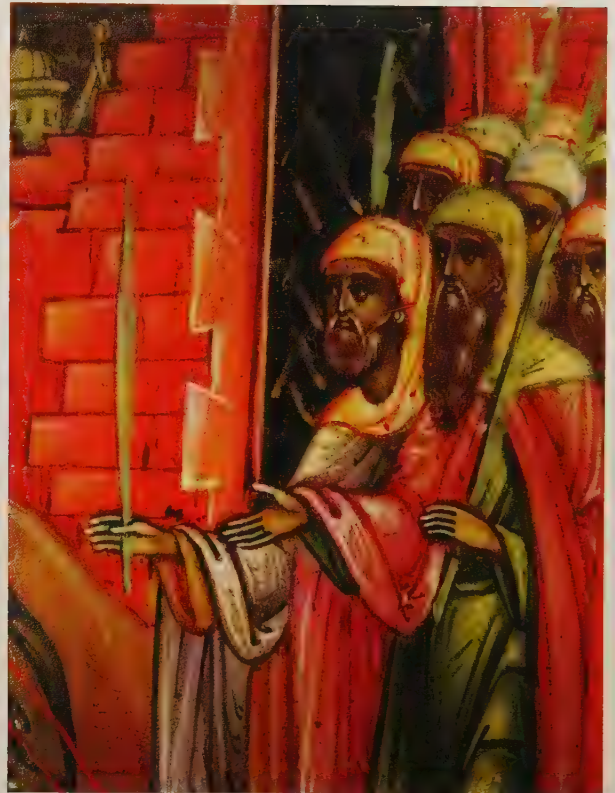
My mother often warned me to keep away from the next day; "Sufficient for the day is enough," she would say. The diagnosis I have is indeed serious and will become progressive. But I try to recall my mother's words and enjoy the day that is in front of me. The rest will play out on its own field at the right time. Meanwhile, life is too short to be missed.



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SPEAKING OF *Saints*

James Torrens, S.J.



We are all called to be saints. That truth does not admit of downplaying. We are, in other words, called to identify fully and actively with Jesus Christ. Our baptism puts us on this path, as Saint Paul made clear. He addressed “the church of God” at Rome as a people “called to be holy.” He referred to “the church of God that is in Corinth,” those obstreperous folk, as “sanctified in Christ Jesus” and “called to be holy.” He greeted the new Christians in Philippi and Ephesus and Colossae simply as “the holy ones.” This identity and status, the effect of what Saint Athanasius called our “divinization,” can be willfully abandoned only by misuse of freedom.

We have to acknowledge, as well, God’s universal salvific will. For it is “God our savior who wills everyone to be saved and to come to knowledge of the truth” (1 Timothy 2:4). My poem attempts to celebrate this hidden and universal calling and the goodness and heroism it evokes from many, a heroism mostly unsung.

The way to becoming a saint has perhaps never been put better, outside of the New Testament, than in *The Introduction to the Devout Life*, by Saint Francis de Sales.

The practice of devotion must be adapted to the strength, to the occupation and to the duties of each one in particular. Tell me, please, my Philothea [“lover of God”], whether it is proper for a bishop to want to live a solitary life like a Carthusian; or for married people to be no more concerned than a Capuchin about increasing their income; or for a working man to spend his whole day in church like a religious; or on the other hand for a religious to be constantly exposed like a bishop to all the events and circumstances that bear on the needs of our neighbor.

Saint Francis adds that whatever proposed form of holiness “works against or is inimical to, anyone’s legitimate vocation and calling, then it is very definitely false devotion.”

We do persist in reserving the category of “saint” for those who have gone all-out, notably, and gained a formal recognition from the church. These we admire and wonder at and invoke, though we mostly regard their pattern of life as out of reach for us. Still we are powerfully attracted. The enthusiasm generated by *My Life with the Saints*, by James Martin, S.J., and the video derived from it, is due to the book’s bringing them much closer, helping us walk in their shoes.

I must confess my own attraction to “holy ground,” places where our all-stars of sanctity have lived and moved. Lima, Peru, and Santiago, Chile, have been such places for me, to say nothing of Assisi and Siena, Italy. This past June, I was blessed with ten days in Ars, France, whose famous pastor, or curé, from 1818 to 1859, was Saint John Vianney. On June 19, when Pope Benedict declared Saint John the patron of all priests worldwide, diocesan and religious, I was able to offer Mass in the basilica of Ars with many of the priests from Birmingham, England. Such an occasion lifts you off your feet.

The challenge now arises for me, what to make of the life of this great exemplar of another era, with its elements at an extreme—the vocation against all odds, the unflagging zeal, the austerity and self-abnegation, the harassment by evil spirits. Jean Vianney, born in 1786, grew up, with minimal schooling, in the chaos of the French Revolution and its persecution of the church. Determined to be a priest but unable to learn Latin, he was sent home from the seminary because he could not follow the lectures. But a holy pastor became his mentor and his advocate, teaching him theology in French. From these two holy people I draw the lesson of tremendous and confident persistence towards a goal appearing out of reach.

The population of Ars, too small today to be on many maps, still surrounded by fields of corn and wheat, was about 250 when John was sent there. Religious devotion and even instruction were in neglect, but taverns and dance halls flourished. The young pastor set out to reverse these conditions, via blunt language from the pulpit, day and night prayer, and goodness to the poor. He deprived himself of furnishings and clothing but spared no expense for the church and its festivities, commenting “An old cassock goes well with a lovely chasuble.” He was determined to lead his whole parish in procession to heaven.

Portraying God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—insistently as loving and merciful, Saint John ran

counter to the Jansenism rampant in that century. He was, however, all too aware of the depredations of sin about which he often had on his lips the phrase, “What a pity!” And he trembled for his own salvation, longing for a contemplative life and even trying three times, disconsolate, to run away from his parish.

In the confessional, the Curé of Ars was anything but a pushover, as people reported, yet he had the gift of reading their spiritual condition and they were drawn to his counsel, as well as to God’s mercy. In later years he would spend 15 or 16 hours a day in the confessional, a miracle of attentiveness and endurance. What I find here in Saint John is tremendous respect for the charism he had as a confessor and a huge proof of the vitality of the sacrament. (The contrasting view of a priest half-hearted about confessing and about much else in his calling is available in the fine old story, “The Prince of Darkness,” by J. F. Powers, available in his collection by the same title.)

The kitchen in the Curé’s house, intact today, is as spare as his diet was, mostly boiled potatoes. Mainly it served as his parlor and place to meet people. Nearby was a house he erected to educate poor girls and take in orphan girls. Here at La Providence, he himself would eat and instruct the children. Three women collaborators, headed by Catherine Lassagne, kept this project on a stable footing; eventually some religious sisters took it over and ran it for more than a century.

Saint John’s penances and austerity are painful to contemplate. In his early years people could hear him sometimes upstairs in the pastor’s house at night, taking the discipline for long periods. He later admitted to treating his “cadaver” severely in his early days; but what needs remembering is his strong sense of the spiritual combat. As the people started flocking to confession, a palpable enemy responded. The upstairs room of the pastor’s house became the scene of frequent loud taunting, harassment and even assault from the evil spirit, whom he called “le Grappin,” “the Claw,” which was an instrument sharply toothed for grubbing in garden or field.

The Curé of Ars, on the sesquicentennial of his death, appeals above all for one thing, as every saint must—his closeness to God. The teacher Jean Pertinax testified of him, “He had only one thought, one desire to love God and make him loved.” André Ravier, S.J., tells us in *Le Curé d’Ars, Un Pretre pour le Peuple de Dieu*, that when he visited the sick, he needed only a few words burning with love to stir up their confidence

Above all the Blessed Sacrament drew and held John Vianney. For him, says Ravier, "the Real Presence was heaven on earth," and the church, therefore, was the heart of the village. "Little by little," Ravier says, "the people of Ars were imbued with the sense that God dwelt among them." I can attest that even a few days in the sanctuary town communicates that sense still.

Flying to France, I brought along to read a life of another saint, *Thérèse of Lisieux, God's Gentle Warrior*, by Thomas Nevin. The book is wide-ranging and penetrating. Here is a very different French holy woman from the end of the same 19th century—from a bourgeois ambience and a tight-knit feminine world, a gifted writer, all too short-lived. There are no visionary phenomena in Thérèse's story or envisaged in her "little way" of cultivating the unexceptional. Yet in a content world infected by Jansenism, she, like Saint John, was having none of it. Three of the plays she wrote for the Sisters portray conversions of fear into love. With her novices, we are told, she guarded against "the physical and psychological hazards of mortifications, especially when indulged with a girlish fervor." Readily imbibing the spirit of Saint Francis de Sales, she insisted upon a joyful countenance.

One could go on about Thérèse, as seen by Nevin, above all her paradoxical daring, that vigorous initiative of wanting to be a missionary for the world, including her promise to spend eternity doing good here—a promise amply fulfilled. In her final months a dark cloud enveloped her and walled her off from prospects of the next life. Faith and hope deserted her, but not love. She abandoned herself to God, as Saint John Vianney did many times over in his desolation. This dark night, covering the last 18 months of her life, has given Thérèse's story a tremendous power.

The stories of the saints do not need to be prettied up, sugared over. They are meant to encourage and to tutor us in our very different circumstances—our world of internet connection, sexual revolution, the Hubble telescope, green movements, Muslim upheaval and all the rest. We still need intensity of prayer, plus our measures of discipline and generosity, to become saints. We need reminders of the specific place in the procession of saints waiting for us. On the cathedral walls of Los Angeles, the artist John Nava has pictured the saints of every era in tapestries that set them all shoulder to shoulder on the march towards the altar and the sanctuary. We, too, can be in that number.

The Saints En Marche

Say who the saints are, in their procession:

One whose heart has ripened though the head will not,
One who keeps on laughing, but through sores,
One who shrinks from the limelight,
One put to work young and with no school,
One a caregiver, biting her tongue,
One putting his everyday life on the line,
One a soft touch for piteous appeals,
One a perennial for the clean-up detail.

Lord, I want to be of that number.

Though I've ill used my birthright of brains,
Though I'm one to whine when it hurts,
Though I like seeing my name in print,
Though my hands wear no calluses,
Though I flinch at visiting the ill,
Though I've slayed out of the line of time,
Though I can scowl most stingily,
Though I have others to clean up my mess.

So when the trumpet sounds its call,
and when the new world is revealed,
O reach me some cup of kindness,
All you obscure saints en marche.

James Torrens, S.J.

A PRACTICE IN GROUP SPIRITUALITY:

IGNATIAN SPIRITUAL EXERCISES FOR THE CORPORATE PERSON

Judith A. Roemer and the ISECP Staff



In 2007 our Ignatian Spiritual Exercises for the Corporate Person group (ISECP) celebrated its thirtieth anniversary. For us it was a celebration of gratitude for our being able to be a part of one of the more interesting apostolic works in the Catholic Church: working with groups making apostolic decisions and contributing to the well-being of those who are responsible for having to carry out those decisions. Our efforts are one practical way of living a group spirituality.

ISECP began with a question: *What does grace look like in a group?* It was clear we all knew what sin looked like in a group; but here was an opportunity to look for and work with the grace that is offered to those who have to live and work and make decisions together. Exploring that question and working to find processes that foster quality participation among group members has led us through years of facilitating groups, writing four books and several articles, producing two video series and conducting many workshops and consultations—many on the spirituality of the group “as group.”

Part of the ISECP work over the years has been to develop structures and processes that help a group as a group live and work together to make quality decisions for the good of their own group and those they serve. We in ISECP have chosen to work intentionally as a group. Although that has been clumsy at times, not necessarily time-efficient or revenue producing, we have grown personally and have had the satisfaction of working with grace in ourselves and in those we assist. We have had a taste of what it means to be a “co-laborer with God,” who is *Deus operarius*, God the Worker. We continue to meet and work together twice each year as we have done for the past 30 years.

Since the members of ISECP have been schooled in the Ignatian tradition, it is important to us that we find room for our insights and practice within the Ignatian charism. We were well aware of the broad richness of that tradition which highlights such processes and attitudes as an incarnational view of the world, prayer over scripture, the use of the imagination in prayer, spiritual conversation, the consciousness examen, the rules for and the practice of discernment, the *Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius* and the practice of communal discernment. Although we might us

any of these practices at any given time, our emphasis of our ISECP work has been on the dynamics of the *Spiritual Exercises* and communal discernment.

ISECP facilitation has been used by a wide range of leadership groups, planning committees, provinces of religious communities, medical practices, law firms, church organizations, civic groups and other usually non-profit entities. In general these groups consist of people who have a serious interest and commitment to the mission of their organization. ISECP offers them a structured way of proceeding with their deliberations in a relatively peaceful setting and helps them as a group to pay attention to the grace that is present in their midst. The results from the facilitation, structures and processes are often a consolation to them, enriching their life together and facilitating their work on behalf of other people.

ISECP facilitation and processes work best for groups asking themselves deep, important questions that touch on their common vocation together and their ongoing work. Among the topics have been questions and decisions about issues such as:

- Whom to select for provincial
- How to spend a \$1,000,000 inheritance wisely
- Whether or not to meld one religious community into another
- Which institutions should be eliminated within a diocese
- How to make plans for closing a religious community
- A position paper leading to the reunion of several small churches on their stance and interactions with the homosexual community
- Long-range planning and focus for the next 10 years of group life together.

There have been many others.

THE PLACE OF GROUP SPIRITUALITY

What is behind our thinking about this aspect of group spirituality?

ISECP assumes that spirituality is a conscious relationship with God both personally and communally. That consciousness influences both the *process* and the

product of the group's life together. Decisions made by the group take the "God factor" seriously.

"Why group spirituality?" In the past few decades there has been a decided shift in the world's consciousness. At one time when living and deciding may have been simpler, one person may have been more able to handle leadership and decision-making alone. However, at this point in history, the day of the enlightened amateur is probably over. We now live with many complexities that are seriously beyond the wisdom and competency of any one person. We need expertise beyond that of one person. As noble as it is for one person to be personally holy and attentive to the Spirit, many of the needs we face today call for the grace, wisdom and expertise of a whole group of people working on solutions. We are in an era when "corporate sanctity" or group spirituality—along with personal holiness—builds the kingdom.

In fact today's complexities call for such a wide range of wisdom, experience and grace that it takes a whole group of people, acting as a group, to address them. If it is true that individual good intentions alone are often unfocused and disconnected (and surely we see a plethora of unfinished, disconnected good projects around the world), then it becomes imperative to find a way to focus the efforts of many good people, as a group, to accomplish a definite task. In days past saints were individuals known for their capacity to pray and decide. There was a special recognized goodness about their being contemplative. In today's world and in the years to come, groups, as groups, may be canonized as saints because they are people acting together who let themselves be guided by the Spirit, listen to each other, explore options, make decisions and remain faithful to the meetings that lead to focused actions.

THE IMPORTANCE OF MEETINGS FOR SPIRITUAL CONVERSATION

Faithful participation in meetings is an important opportunity for a group to wrestle with the decisions of its apostolic life. Conducting that meeting as a *contemplative experience* is fundamental to the Ignatian charism. It is inspired by the carefulness of group dialogue expressed in the "Deliberations of the First Fathers," a short manuscript written by Ignatius and his companions on the process they used to found the Society of Jesus. This art of spiritual conversation is at the heart of the charism. The art of spiritual conversation is the intentional conversation and coming

to decision among group members. This conversation may occur in spiritual direction, the dialog of authority/obedience, a formal communal discernment or a community meeting with an apostolic thrust.

HOW TO IMAGINE GROUP SPIRITUALITY

It might be useful to have a specific group in mind as you read the rest of this paper. For purposes here, let us assume that the group has six to eight members, both men and women. Let us also assume that they have been together with a common purpose for a while. Their time together has allowed them to talk with one another reasonably well and helped them develop a common vocabulary so that they know what each other means by what is said. Furthermore, they have a commitment to engage each other in an ongoing apostolic enterprise. In other words, they are friends and believers, rather than competitors, who share a responsibility to gather as much truth as possible about decisions in order to accomplish a good work.

It is important that this group of believers be challenged in some way in its call to holiness, to recognize the activity of God in its life and the continuing movement of the Spirit among its members. They need some capacity for honesty and reflection so that the graces and limitations of the group can be acknowledged, modified or supported as needed. There is also the assumption that group members are willing to attend and participate in all of the meetings so that the process of being together moves forward and develops into discerned action for the betterment of the world. Irregular participation often upsets the balance of the group and forces the group to take precious extra time to include those who have been absent from the previous meetings. Summarized topics and information are poor substitutes for the dynamics and team building of the group.

MATURATION OF GROUP SPIRITUALITY

Most groups know how to begin and end something; few apostolic groups know how to live and work with each other during the time in between. The impulse to cut off a project or the relationships involved during times of difficulty and to begin something new rather than to suffer through the ambiguous call to “sustained intimacy” is always a temptation. Yet groups, as group, can learn to live and work together over a long period

of time in apostolic ministry. They do develop a group spirituality. Members extend their contemplative stance beyond their own personal prayer to include the group meeting as a privileged place where God invites them *as a group*, to contemplate the work of the apostolate and to face the demands of the apostolate, to move beyond their own individual sinfulness and limitations to pay attention to the promptings of the Spirit, to make the demanding choices required by their call. This is group spirituality.

From one point of view, the *process* of the group meeting is a legitimate aspect of contemporary asceticism. As a group juggles the many problems, persons and purposes of its life together to reach some clarity of decision, it often experiences *nada*. There are so many “no’s” considering both the positive and negative aspects of evaluations and recommendations before a group comes to a “yes” that represents its grace and consensus. Often the group erroneously names these struggles as “desolations, times of a lack of faith, hope and love” (*Spiritual Exercises* 316-317), when in fact the struggles may be the dark and purifying elements of faith so well described in the *via negativa* of contemplation.

As a group matures, however, it moves to a more positive stance, seeing itself sharing the presence of the God of history and co-laboring with God to promote good. This awareness of the personal, immanent God has opened the group to include an awareness of the working, eminent God. The personal graces and consolations of the individuals are now shared and focused in a common, apostolic mission with other people.

If people come together with this faith-filled frame of mind, then their contemplative stance necessarily brings a quality of presence to their work. This is grace in action. Furthermore, the group continues to grow in its own identity, vocation and mission. It is on the threshold of becoming a working community. This does not all happen at once. Rather, the group process has an inevitable way of challenging and highlighting first one aspect, then another of that progression of identity, vocation and mission, much as the seasons of the year emphasize a phase of the life cycle.

Among the many definitions of grace that are available to us, the description that best suits our purposes here is inspired by the renowned German Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner. “Grace is the quality of one’s personal presence to the world.” In this

formulation we see that groups of believers are called to participate in a quality of ministry that witnesses to the consolations of their faith. Both the *fruit* of their ministry to the people and the process of participation among the ministers themselves bear witness to the reality of the Spirit's influence on personal presence. The *means* that they use to conduct business and to talk with one another *needs to be consonant* with the quality of their calling and responsibilities. The *process* or means by which they come to decisions requires a respect for individual perspectives and demands a high level of quality in the group's interactions. The means they use must enter into and inform the end result. Thus models of leadership and administration that block out or ignore this respect for individuals and group wisdom, that are based on believing that a good end can justify unchristian means for accomplishing it, or that those in authority can disregard their role as facilitator of the community's wider wisdom and grace are not useful in the practice of group spirituality.

The meeting, similar to a prayer session or an examination of consciousness, helps a group to focus its energies. Difficult as that might be, by carefully attending to the work of the meeting and contributing to its dynamism, the group, as group, has the satisfaction of seeing their disparate thoughts and ideas align toward a common purpose. The initial doubts and anxieties about deciding among options can be transformed into the power of focused action.

INTERDEPENDENCE

In both contemplation and the group meeting a person acknowledges his or her own sinfulness and limitations. (Being aware of the sinfulness and limitations of others is usually not so difficult!) Both individual contemplation and the group meeting challenges one to deal with one's freedom, God's freedom and the freedom of others in the group. Reluctantly sometimes, a person must learn the awesomeness of that freedom and his or her interdependence on others. In addition both the group meeting and the contemplative experience call an individual beyond what he or she would ordinarily be able to do or acknowledge as an individual. In this case the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Both individual contemplation and participating in evaluation, recommendations, decisions and actions prepare a person for widened responsibilities in the apostolate

As time proceeds, cultivating a contemplative presence to each other in the group meeting brings about service in action.

where one joins with others to work out what is needed.

Most individuals will experience the tension between being true to his or her own individual call and inspiration and at the same time having to work with other good people in the group. Together they will have to work through the obstacles of anger, secretiveness, one-up-manship, pouting, etc. The reality remains that it is these people—with these ideas, with these shortcomings—that become the group that now attends to the work at hand. It is a very unromantic reality.

As time proceeds, cultivating a contemplative presence to each other in the group meeting brings about service in action. This mutual service in action expresses itself by members' showing patience, humility and charity toward each other; trusting each other, challenging each other with support and communal listening to and speaking of the Word. Hopefully these expressions of service facilitate both individual and group freedom. Amid our communion with God in the works of devotion, the members of the group witness a zeal for the service of others and a generous dedication to the invitation of the Trinity to enter into the apostolate in incarnational ways. The group participates in transforming creation into the fullness of Christ. It happens among themselves and among those they serve.

Ignatius says in the *Contemplatio Ad Amorem* (*Spiritual Exercises* 230), "Love manifests itself in deeds rather than in words." How a group comes to decision is constitutive of whether or not it can be a catalyst for the kingdom. The group dies if it does not go into action. Furthermore, the group does not go into full contemplation until it goes into action. It works both ways. George

Schemel, S.J., the founder of the Jesuit Center for Spiritual Growth at Wernersville, Pennsylvania, was fond of saying, "Discerned action for the kingdom is a constitutive part of contemplation."

THE MEETING PROCESS AS CONTEMPLATION

Let us take a look at a regular, ordinary meeting to see how it might be a focus for group spirituality. Even the routine reports of any meeting provide a *lectio*, or wide reading of the human events which the group must then deal with and think through. This is the data-gathering time for any group, the time in which the members hear the information from each other and assimilate it together. It may well be a time also of personal challenge. Group members are confronted by their own personal thoughts and feelings as well as those of this group. They are further called upon to serve the others selflessly by listening and contributing.

The bulk of the meeting is taken up with a series of agenda items that call for evaluation, recommendation, decision and action. Each phase of this power cycle seems to bring the group back into its contemplative stance of listening, sorting and deciding.

The phase of evaluation uses aspects of *lectio*, *meditatio* and *oratio* much like the classic forms of prayer. In some profound and very existential way the group is being asked to look at the considerations of agenda by reading its own history in the light of Scripture. It is here that the signs of the times, the facts, the recall of our faith heritage is being touched by and oriented to the action of the Spirit in history. Perhaps the group's greatest challenge comes in trying to honor the freedoms of all in the group and to maintain a spirit of hospitality for any new ideas that are offered.

The phase of recommendation calls a group to a spirit of detachment and spiritual freedom. It is a form of *meditatio* in which we stand before the mystery of this season of history to face and deal with the attractions of the Word. When a group recommends, it is investigating, making connections, discriminating, seeking and seeing the implications of this call from the Lord. Underlying its work will be a conviction that as a group, rather than as an individual, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. It is this conviction that allows group members to nurture each other's ideas and not seek to possess a new brainchild as though it belonged solely to him or her.

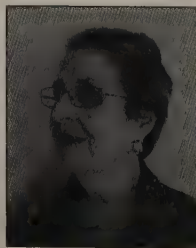
The test of seriousness comes during the time of decision. It is a form of *oratio* (desire) as a group names

the consensus it reads from its own deliberations. Here the group takes its own identity, vocation and mission very seriously and is willing to name the way in which it deliberately chooses to commit its limited resources in these definite ways, to the exclusion of other fine ways. This group will collaborate with God's invitation in this way to help build the kingdom. Here it is that a group declares its primary consensus: that it is one in the Spirit and willing to take the consequences of that unity very seriously. Furthermore, the group will use the decision to focus its energies and agree to plan for and commit the time, money and resources needed to carry out that decision.

If the preparations of this decision-making process or discernment have been authentic, then the group is together in mind, heart and faith about its thrust. There is peace and joy interiorly within the group as a whole and the individual members. There is a new graced energy to be about the work at hand.

All these aspects make meetings a complex reality as complicated as the number of people who attend and bring with them their own insights, history, ambitions, dreams and sinfulness. It is that complex reality, plus the reality of this group *as group* with its own call and freedom that is gathered. There is the interplay of details and large perspective; the need to gather more information, logic and feelings; the need to organize and decide and the need to look outward as well as inward. This richness along with the group's inspiration and creativity, how it cooperates and engages with legitimate authority, adds to the complexity. The meeting is the place where a multitude of human factors and good discernment come together. If the group members have taken their vocation to the group meeting seriously, then they know how some parts of process are easy for them, but other parts challenge, confront and stretch them.

Thus the question remains, what does grace look like in a group? I have told you about our experience with it. What is yours?



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The Parrot Lady

Margaret Cessna, H. M.



Tenderness can tear your heart apart. Anger can, too. We did not realize that it was such a common experience until we debriefed over apple pie, French fries, coffee and Manhattans at Pepy's diner at midnight. We had spent the day in Mexico.

Some of us had gone on a boat cruise at Marina del Rey a few days before. We had become so numbed by the splendor and size of the yachts we passed that we zeroed in on boat names as a distraction. We had also driven down Rodeo Drive and wondered if people who were so consumed by wealth could be happy. It felt as though the genius of Madison Avenue was seeping through the open car windows and that took our breath away. We caught a glimpse of the window displays and the logo-ed shopping bags as we teased each other about our own brand of high-class fashion. Before we knew it, we had slipped into a rather seedy part of town. It didn't take long to pass from one to the other and the stark differences between the two suddenly became symbolic of the growing imbalance in this world. Who holds these people down, we wondered, as we couldn't help but notice that we seemed to be to them what Rodeo Drive had been to us—representations of fabulous wealth. We talked then about when and how all of us will answer for our sins.

What dawned on me then was that they were all related. I had met the children and the grandchildren of the parrot lady.

In Tijuana, I had to sit on the curbstone to talk to the first street vendor I met, she was so little. Necklaces hung from her outstretched arm. I asked her where her Mama was.

"Two dollar," she replied.

She would not let me look into her eyes. Finally, I pressed a dollar into her hand and told her no necklace. She walked away. There was a tilt to her head that told me it was not her new dollar that made her who she was. A subtle dignity marked her as I watched her approach another stranger. I didn't stay long enough to see if she made a sale.

On another street corner, I met the parrot lady. One of her parrots hangs from the ceiling of my office. She didn't seem to understand my questions but she understood when I didn't pass by that she might make a sale. She reached into her plastic bag and pulled out a small, fluffy, rainbow parrot on a colored string. She handed me one and it fit nicely in the palm of my hand. It felt soft—warm, even. The brilliant colors, yellow, red, blue, green and orange made me think that making it may have brightened even her day. It was obviously crafted with patience and care. I wondered how long it took her to make one and how many she would sell that day. She interrupted my thoughts.

"One dollar."

I asked her how much they would be if I bought "mas."

She replied, "One dollar."

I bought three. Then another. Yet another. I walked away with five parrots. Her expression never

changed. I wanted to meet her children and maybe her grandchildren, if she had any. I wondered where she lived and what she would have for supper. As I walked away with my treasures, I knew something had happened to me.

I wandered around for a while longer before rendezvousing with my group for a cold drink before we headed back to the border. As we sat under the umbrellas we were surrounded by the street kids selling gum. They must have known we were an easy touch but they taught us some hard truths about parents who are so poor that they must send even the smallest of children into the streets. The small packets of Chicklets, I suppose, allowed them some trace of dignity. At least they were not common beggars. We wondered together if we were perpetuating the system of providing some simple relief for children and families so that they could get through another day in order to prepare for yet another day, another year, a full lifetime of the same. Was there something else we were called to do? We did not know what awaited us.

We passed him on the way back to the border. He was about four years old and sang "La Bamba" for us as he strummed a tattered three-string toy guitar. There was no fire in his eyes and probably none in his spirit. He didn't sing for joy but for the dollar that one of us put in his basket. I was so ashamed when I thought about it later as we were driving home. I would rather have held him than applauded his performance. What dawned on me then was that they were all related. I had met the children and the grandchildren of the parrot lady. They were all over the streets of Tijuana speaking the same message, scrambling for the same dollar, crying the same tears, sleeping in the same shack.

A heaviness grabbed at me, moved in and overcame me. I felt powerless. In the past I did all the things that I thought I could do. I protested. I contributed. I marched. Wrote letters. Screamed at the president. After all of that, these kids were still on the street with empty dinner bowls or no dinner bowls at all. I have seen it on TV and read about it but I have never touched them or experienced the real stench of poverty. I cried and prayed. Neither made much difference. I carry them on my shoulders now. They own a piece of my heart. They run around in my soul. They have convinced me that it is not good enough anymore to be a nice person who simply cares.

The small street vendor. The parrot lady. The “La Bamba” child. None of them looked at me. None of them extended a thread of interest in me as a person. None of them invited a relational response. I don’t know why—I can only guess. Language barrier? A reminder as I made a purchase or donation that I came from a kind of wealth that they could never dream of having? A resentment because I could give and they had to beg or sell? Maybe they were tired. Or hungry. Whatever the reason, all three made it clear that they wanted only to get past this moment and on with their business.

I wish there were some definite conclusion or clear direction. Perhaps it is simply to welcome the pain that hits at me so that the moment my life was touched will be a continuing source of push-pull that will keep me off yachts, away from famous logos and firmly rooted in the heart of the city, the city of God.

Letting it go at that somehow does not seem to be enough. The parrot lady, her children and grandchildren moved me. I knew something had been knocked loose inside of me that would never be put back into place. I have to figure out now what I’m going to do about Mexico. Figure out how I live with the face of the “La Bamba” child haunting my dreams and sobering my reflections.

But it is not enough. There is more to it than that because I participate in my own way in their oppression and that’s what I have to look at as well. I think of

friends and colleagues who hang a picture of Gandhi in their office, pay tribute to Martin Luther King, Jr., honor Oscar Romero, have peace bumper stickers on their cars and yet don’t talk through their conflicts. I’m talking about people who celebrate the concept of peace and freedom and discipline their students with power instead of dignity. I’m talking about people who read liberation theology, who teach liberation theology and who isolate and exclude others and leave them questioning “Why?” and “What happened?” I’m talking about people who work on behalf of people who are poor, who serve poor people but find it so hard to do a simple favor for a friend or colleague. I’m talking about what we do to each other in the name of God.

So a trip like this is bad for the heart but good for the soul because these colleagues and friends that I am talking about are me. I’m talking about myself and pray that I have the courage for resolution in my life so that someday I can go back to Tijuana, find that parrot lady and tell her thank you in person. She won’t understand. Perhaps I’ll just buy another parrot.



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What Supports You?

Peter van Breemen, S.J.



“**N**o human being has ever desired anything as much as God desires to be with him or her.” With these simple words Meister Eckhart (1260–1328) expressed a basic truth of our Christian faith. We cannot imagine how much God desires each one of us. “Thou burning God in your longing,” prays the German mystic Mechtild of Magdeburg (1207–1282), and she explains:

God has enough of all things. Contact with the soul is the one thing he never has enough of. He says: “That I love you exceedingly is part of my nature, because I am love itself. That I love you often comes from my longing, because I long to be heartily loved. That I love you for so long comes from my eternity, because I am without beginning and end.”

It is inherent to God’s nature that he wishes to give himself. The mystery of the Trinity is not so much that three are one, and are three; but rather that the Father can give himself so totally, that the whole fullness of the Father is in the Son, and that the Son is capable of surrendering

himself so completely to the Father that he holds nothing back of himself. Through this absolute giving of himself, Father and Son are one in the Holy Spirit. It is this perfect unity through self-giving which transcends all our understanding and will forever remain a blessed mystery. Around the year 200 Tertullian introduced the word "Trinity" into the theological vocabulary, and thereby did us a disservice by setting us off on the heels of a number-problem, whereas the Trinity is really a mystery of unimaginable love. That mystery is the total self-surrender of divine love, which utterly surpasses human concepts.

The divine Persons do not only want to give themselves to one another; the triune God also wants to give God's very self to us, which is precisely why God created us. This is the meaning of creation and of our own lives. Since God is love, a love that by its very nature wants to give itself, God needs me. God loved me into existence and continues to do so at every moment in order to share divine love with me. In the concluding meditation of the *Spiritual Exercises* Ignatius asks the exercitant to consider "How the Lord wishes to give himself to me as much as he can" (*Sp* 234). Meister Eckhart stresses: "God never gives a gift, and never has given one, so that we may possess it and restrict ourselves to that. Rather all gifts that he has ever given on heaven and earth, he gave with one end in view: he himself is the gift."

In the Psalms we read: "By the word of the LORD the heavens were made, and all their host by the breath of his mouth." And again: "For he spoke, and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood firm" (Psalm 33:6, 9). The Psalmist is seeking to express the sovereign ease with which God created the universe. The Hebrew verb *dabar*, when used in reference to a human person, means "speak." But when applied to God, it means "create." The idea is that God needs only to speak, and what he says is.

But we can never speak about God with only *one* word or in only *one* image. God is too big for our little human words and thoughts. We always need a second word to complete the first, and another image to break up the first. But even then our language always falls short. Thus, in the case of the truth that God creates just through speaking, one might think that anything that cost so little could not be worth very much—which would be a complete misunderstanding. The Anglican theologian William Vanstone reports an event that enriches and deepens our idea of creation. Before the

God loved me into existence and continues to do so at every moment in order to share divine love with me.

Second World War a young man suffered severe brain damage in an accident. Only an operation could save him, but up until then no such operation had ever been performed. An experienced surgeon offered to try it, in hopes of saving the young man's life, but also stating clearly that there was only a very rare chance that the surgery would be successful. The operation was extremely difficult and dangerous, as one small mistake would have fatal consequences. Medically speaking, the intervention was off the map. The operation lasted seven hours, with the surgeon's concentration stretched to the limit throughout—and it worked. Afterwards the surgeon was completely exhausted and had to be led away by the nurse like a blind man or a little boy. He had really given everything he had to save the patient's life. This too is an image of divine creation.

According to Isaiah, God says to Israel: "Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you, I give people in return for you, nations in exchange for your life" (Isaiah 43:4). Later the prophet adds: "As the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you" (Isaiah 62:5). In the New Testament, God's promise is expanded to all nations; everyone can take these words in an altogether personal sense. Paul goes even further: "He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else?" (Romans 8:32). Every person receives God's self-gift. Saint Teresa of Avila challenges us to "recognize the truth that there is in ourselves something incomparably more precious than what

we externally perceive.” She was a woman with a healthy sense of self. She liked to quote a text in which God speaks: “O soul, seek yourself in me; and, soul, seek me in yourself. . . . Thou art my house and my dwelling, thou art my home for ever and ever.” The experience of such nearness and loyalty by God supported Teresa, and made her life extraordinarily fruitful.

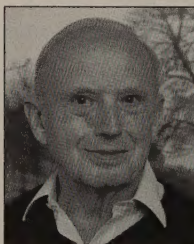
The crucial thing is to let such texts make their way into our heart of hearts and to savor them to the fullest, in the holy conviction that they are meant quite personally for every one of us. It is all about me! A young woman was home by herself channel-surfing until she got bored. Then she went through the house and saw an open Bible on a cabinet. She looked at it and read the verse: “The LORD loved him [Solomon], and sent a message by the prophet Nathan; so he named him Jedidiah, because of the LORD” (2 Samuel 12:24-25). In the footnote she read that Jedidiah means “beloved of the LORD.” This phrase struck her, and she experienced an inescapable sense that it referred to her. She became blissfully happy, and began dancing around the deserted apartment. This intense experience wound up shaping her entire life. When she was later confirmed, she chose “Jedidiah” as her confirmation name. Even today she makes a point of using it.

An essential element of the doctrine of creation is that every person is a “wanted child,” willed and affirmed by God. This contains an undreamt-of source of encouragement for accepting ourselves. The first act of adoring God consists in accepting the fact that we come from God’s hand. Edith Stein writes: “[Our]

love is entirely directed to God, but in union with divine love the created spirit also embraces itself in recognition, in free and happy affirmation, of itself. Surrender to God is at the same time surrender to one’s own God-loved Self and the whole Creation.”

The Christians in the early Church were for the most part simple people. But they always had the message proclaimed to them: “*Agnosce, Christiane, dignitatem tuam*,” (“Recognize, O Christian, your worth?”) God has brought us together so that we can live and proclaim the truth of his love, which is directed at all of us. That is the Church. God loves every one of us into existence. God’s complete, undivided love goes forth to every one of us. We have to internalize this message and make it the foundation of our life. The central-European mystic Angelus Silesius (1624-1677), who had a special talent for expressing profound truths in warm and clear words, puts it this way: “There is still nothing here more beautiful than I am, because God, beauty itself, has fallen in love with me.”

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Jesuit Father Peter Van Breemen’s influence on the Church stretches worldwide with his best-selling books published in many languages. He presently resides in Aachen, Germany, where he directs retreats and offers spiritual direction.